

# **FROM GREEN TO SOMEWHAT SAGE**

**WISDOM GLEANED BY  
A LONG-TERM PASTOR**

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**FOREST SPRINGS PASTORS AND  
CHRISTIAN WORKERS RETREAT  
NOVEMBER 5-7, 2023**

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## **SERIES INTRODUCTION**

### **A STAGE, AGES, AND SELFIES TO GET THINGS STARTED**

“All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts”

Shakespeare wrote that. I take the stage tonight as a retreat speaker, but I have played many parts in the past. These teaching sessions emerge from my pastoral experience. I usually say little about myself in my teaching. But this series aligns testimony with doctrine and application.

One writer called refusing to share experience, “inverted egotism,— selfishness masquerading in disguise of reluctance to speak of self.” He added, “it is not regarded as egotism when the passing steamer signals across the Atlantic wave news of her escape from perils of iceberg or fog, or welcome news of good cheer. Yet individuals shrink into themselves, repressing rigorously the fraternal instinct which bids them communicate the fruits of their experience to their fellows.” Shunning such inverted egotism, I will provide a few snapshots of my life to give you some background for my role at this pastors and Christian workers retreat.

- I became a Christian in my junior year of high school on Easter Sunday.
- I started college as a music major but switched to Bible College because a Jehovah’s Witness turned me into a pretzel one day. I wanted to go deep into God’s word.
- In college I had my first structured ministry—teaching a Sunday School class for 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys.
- I have a bachelor’s degree in Bible and Christian education and a master’s degree in theological studies.
- I have done many jobs before the pastorate. They include cleaning houses, picking up dead animals on a highway, cutting grass, painting, jackhammering, floating concrete, and making deliveries.
- I am ordained in the Evangelical Free Church
- I served as a pastor for almost 40 years.
- I led churches of varying sizes. Weekly attendance ranged from 35 to 1600. The smallest was the most rewarding.
- I have been a solo pastor and have led pastoral staffs of 2, 3, and 9 and church staffs ranging from 3 to 25.
- I served as an interim pastor.
- I served on a denominational board.
- I have worked with various consultants.
- I have had special training in leadership and governance.
- I have taught leadership development classes and seminars.

Enough of my selfies. Back to the Bard and the seven ages through which he claims we pass.

“All the world’s a stage,  
 And all the men and women merely players.  
 They have their exits and their entrances,  
 And one man in his time plays many parts  
 His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
 Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.  
 Then the whining schoolboy with his satchel  
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
 Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
 Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
 Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,  
 Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
 Seeking the bubble reputation  
 Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,  
 In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
 Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
 And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
 Into the lean and slippered pantaloon  
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
 For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
 That ends this strange eventful history,  
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

You encounter me between the ages of puking in the nursery and losing all my teeth. I suppose I best fit Shakespeare’s fifth age, the age of justice. I lack severe eyes but I am working on a rounded belly and already have a beard of formal cut. I come here to share some wise saws and modern instances, as well as ancient ones, to help you serve the Lord better.

Some call this age the “sage.” I have gained enough experience to verge on sagacity at times. I will do my best for you. The title of this set of talks is, “From Green to Somewhat Sage: Wisdom Gleaned by a Long-Term Pastor.” I will tell you the most important things I did not adequately grasp when I was a green pastor. The sessions will be about our Purpose, our Position, our Priorities, and finally Putting it Together.

Allow me to orient you in a few matters.

- I operate from the standpoint that the Bible is free of error and the final authority for all matters of belief and practice.
- I will be using the Christian Standard Bible translation (CSB).

- I am pondering writing a book along the lines of this retreat's content so I have been producing and gathering resources. I have included (after the teaching session notes) materials that might take the shape of a book. As participants in this retreat, you get a sneak peek. All rights are reserved on the material.
- What I say in these sessions applies to everyone, not just pastors.

I play my part as your speaker by the pure grace of God. I did not want to be a pastor. I did not even want to be a Christian. God had other plans. He gets all the glory for any good that emerges from any of us. If I am sage to any degree, it is from clinging to the gospel even when my knees shook, my stomach churned, and my fingers trembled. I am not here as an expert. I am here as a sinner saved by grace who has striven to serve by grace. I am here to help others do the same.

I have been praying for you and these sessions for months. It is only fitting that I pray for us now before starting session one.

## SESSION 1 ~ OUR PURPOSE

In this first session, we explore our main purpose. We will do so by asking three questions as our main points.

### I. WHY DO WE EXIST?

Start with a phone ringing in a senior pastor's office. That is what I heard decades ago while an associate pastor. My senior pastor answered the phone, listened patiently, then asked one question: "Toward what end?" He asked it three times. When he hung up the phone, he explained that a church growth consultant had offered his services. The consultant said, "The church exists to reach people." When my pastor asked, "Toward what end?", the consultant could go no further. He could not put that mission in a larger context.

Being shortsighted like that is common among consultants. For example, one writes, "Those congregations unwilling to make the Great Commission the value that drives all congregational behavior do not have access to many of the resources available to congregations committed to fulfilling the Great Commission." That statement has two serious shortcomings. First, it neglects what drives the great commission. Second, it assumes that you are not committed to fulfilling the great commission unless you see evangelism as the ultimate driver.

God calls the church to reach people with the gospel, but that mission is not why the church exists. That cannot be the reason. Evangelism will stop when history ends, so it cannot be the main purpose of the church that will enter eternal glory. We must serve an end that does not end.

We will not do evangelism in glory. What will we do? What will be the main thing there? Worship. That must be our main purpose. Everything must serve that end if we are to serve God properly. Various church activities will cease when we reach glory. I suppose new pursuits will emerge. But we know that worship will never cease. Worship will infuse all our everlasting behavior.

Another church growth author writes, "The Great Commission institutionalizes mission as the *raison d'être* [meaning the reason for being, the main purpose], the controlling norm, of the church." Wrong. Worship of the living God is the controlling norm of everything, including mission in this fleeting age.

Saying the church's purpose is to reach people is shortsighted. That approach makes it seem like salvation is the most important thing in the universe. It is not. Salvation is a means to produce the worship of God. The holy angels worship God and have never been saved. They know their purpose.

Want to hear a man pray with perspective? Missionary David Brainerd served the Delaware Indians in the early 1700s. Ponder this diary entry about prayer and outreach. "But just at night, the Lord visited me marvelously in prayer; I think my soul never was in such agony before. I felt no restraint, for the treasures of divine grace were opened to me. I wrestled for absent friends, for the ingathering of souls, for multitudes of poor souls, and for many that I

thought were the children of God, personally, in many distant places. I was in such an agony, from sun half an hour high till near dark, that I was all over wet with sweat. Yet it seemed to me that I had wasted away the day and had done nothing. Oh, my dear Jesus did sweat blood for poor souls! I longed for more compassion towards them.”

He loved people more than I do. Yet, he was not human-centered. In another diary entry about prayer, he writes, “I poured out my soul for all the world, friends, and enemies. My soul was concerned, not so much for souls as such, but rather for Christ’s kingdom that it might appear in the world, that God might be known to be God in the whole earth.”

In Isaiah 43:25 God tells Israel the point of salvation, saying, “I—I sweep away your transgressions for my own sake.” God says he judges and saves people so they know that he is Lord. The prophet Ezekiel says that fifty-three times in his book! Psalm 67:2 records a prayer asking God for grace “so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you.”

The New Testament also makes that clear. Here are just a few examples:

- Romans 15:15–16 “Nevertheless, I have written to remind you more boldly on some points because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, serving as a priest of the gospel of God. God’s purpose is that the Gentiles may be an acceptable offering, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”
- 2 Corinthians 5:14–15 “For the love of Christ compels us, since we have reached this conclusion, that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised.”
- 1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”
- Revelation 14:6–7 “Then I saw another angel flying high overhead, with the eternal gospel to announce to the inhabitants of the earth—to every nation, tribe, language, and people. He spoke with a loud voice: ‘Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship the one who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.’”

Reaching people with the gospel is one great way to worship in the present. Its time-bound nature should fuel urgency, but eternity reveals the ultimate purpose of the church. Worship is our chief purpose. But that leads to a vital question.

## II. WHAT IS WORSHIP?

I lacked a robust sense of worship’s meaning in my green phase in church ministry. Many people share that deficiency.

Start with a typical expression we hear in church circles: “The worship in that service was wonderful.” What do people mean? People often mean that the singing moved them emotionally. But if we think worship means singing or feeling, we shortchange ourselves and God. Worship is not music; music is an opportunity for worship. None of the Bible words for worship means singing or playing music. None of the terms are about emotions. Certainly, the terms imply feeling, but they are not terms about feelings so much as they are about the person’s location relative to another.

The Hebrew and Greek terms are “to serve,” “to bow,” and “to kiss.” People in Hebrew and Greek cultures then would bow to kiss the feet of a superior. The vocabulary makes the point that the heart of worship is humility before God the supreme ruler. We cannot always sing but we can always be humble before God. Prideful Christians fail to worship even if church music floods them with warm feelings. Obedient Christians worship even if no one sings and no emotions soar.

People sometimes say, “I cannot worship under these conditions” meaning some secondary aspect of a church service does not suit them. I have heard church folks say that because a drum set merely sat in the room! Put the biblical vocabulary back in the mix—“I cannot bow before God with a drum set in the room. I cannot be humble unless the music fits my taste.”

Should we choose to attend a church where the musical style or sermon length most annoys us? Of course not. Yet, we might serve best where some things do not match our preferences. Orthodoxy is indispensable; options are not.

Worship is valuing God as God. Delighting in the supremacy of God is the most uplifting thing we can do. If you have not done that, you have *not* worshiped, even if you *were* in a worship service. If you have done that, you *have* worshiped, even if you *were not* in a worship service. The church worships by living all of life in the light of the gospel of Christ.

William Temple provides a short but comprehensive definition of worship: “But what worship means is the submission of the whole being to the object of worship. It is the opening of the heart to receive the love of God; it is the subjection of the conscience to be directed by Him; it is the declaration of need to be fulfilled by Him; it is the subjection of desire to be controlled by Him; and, as the result of all these together, it is the surrender of will to be used by Him. It is the total giving of self.”

The main purpose of the church is to put God first. To see remarkable proof of how seriously the Lord takes our worship, consider Revelation 2-3. Those chapters give us the Lord’s assessment of seven churches. Only two of the seven churches got a completely positive review from the Lord. Ephesus was not one of the two. The downside for them comes in Rev 2:4-5: “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”

The word “first” in the phrase “first love” can carry the sense of time (your love at the beginning) and of rank (your practice of priority love). Both overtones are present. The first love of the Ephesian church was dying despite the top-notch spiritual input they received on-site from an apostle and his associates. They had lots of experience and did lots of ministry, but were drifting from God-centered church life.



Notice a remarkable aspect of the Lord's letter. Jesus threatened to remove the Ephesian lampstand because they were drifting from God-centered church life and ministry. Jesus does not hide a lamp under a bushel, but he does remove lampstands. He does close churches.

Consider the phone consultant's claim. He told my senior pastor "The church exists to reach people." If reaching people was the supreme purpose of the church, Jesus would not take away the Ephesian lamp. When the lamp goes, so does outreach. Popular church growth books make that sound like the ultimate disaster. God's book says a church drifting from him is worse. Jesus is about more than plucking people from hell. He is about making a God-centered church. The church indeed exists to reach people. It is truer to say we reach people so the church will exist—for God.

### **III. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY?**

Many. Consider just a few.

#### **A. IGNORE THE MANTRA**

Today a lot of ministry books blame evangelical churches for being "inward-focused." They call on churches to change. The mantra resounds: "Be outward focused." That is bad counsel. It sounds more noble than being inward-focused, but it is the same problem—it is human-focused. Jonathan Leeman makes the point by saying, "man centeredness is the cardinal moral principle of the kingdom of this world. It's the very thing that constitutes fallen humanity as fallen humanity." Putting humans first is the problem, not the solution.

The church should be outward reaching. But that is different than being outward-focused. To be healthy, a local church must be upward-focused. That vertical focus alone provides the platform for proper relations with those inside and outside of the church body.

You find some shocking statements in church growth books. One author asked churches to answer the question, "Why does our congregation exist?" He then said, "For congregations in local communities, there are only three possible answers to this question: 1.) This congregation exists for us—the people inside. 2.) This congregation exists for others—the people outside. 3.) This congregation exists for both." Notice the problem? He left out the fact that the church exists for God.

I have known churches that emphasized outreach but did not prioritize humility. I know one church that neglected its pride issues and went from over 1,000 people on a Sunday to 50. That was over 40 years ago and they never bounced back.

We can become so focused on reaching people that we do not behave like people who have been reached.

#### **B. DON'T BE LIKE A BUSINESS**

I do not mean church leaders should use bad business practices, ignore good communication, and learn nothing from the business world. Some business practices are

helpful. I have read a fair number of business books. But too many ministry books emphasize trendy business terms and models. Some even call us to market the gospel as a product. If we pitch the church as a product, we will produce people who spell service “serve-us.”

God is not a product we market. God is the prime producer. He made creation. He made salvation. Our mission is to call people to worship him. David F. Wells asks, “What is to be gained if we are so intent on reaching out to the unchurched that we then unchurch the reached?” If we become unfocused on God we become unchurched church folks.

### **C. BE LIKE THE WILD ONES**

I will end this talk with what the Apostle John reports in Revelation 4-5. He points upward as he describes the God-given vision. He reports: “After this I looked, and there in heaven was an open door. The first voice that I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

John saw wild creatures surrounding the ultimate throne. He reports: “Each of the four living creatures had six wings; they were covered with eyes around and inside. Day and night they never stop saying, ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God, the Almighty, who was, who is, and who is to come.’ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to the one seated on the throne, the one who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before the one seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne and say, ‘Our Lord and God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power, because you have created all things, and by your will they exist and were created.’”

John then saw the elders and creatures pray and sing a song about Christ the Lamb. They sang: “‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slaughtered, and you purchased people for God by your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation. You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign on the earth.’ Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels around the throne, and also of the living creatures and of the elders. Their number was countless thousands, plus thousands of thousands. They said with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing!’ I heard every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, on the sea, and everything in them say, ‘Blessing and honor and glory and power be to the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!’ The four living creatures said, ‘Amen,’ and the elders fell down and worshiped.”

Unlike the creatures, I am not covered with eyes. But this formerly green pastor came to see more clearly that worship is our reason to exist. Do you? If you do, what will you do to align your life and ministry best with our main purpose?

## SESSION 2 ~ OUR POSITION

Laurie Sargent saw a problem, fixed it, and made a discovery. She explains, “My teenager was headed to school one morning when I told him that the neck tag of his shirt was hanging out. ‘I know,’ he replied. ‘It’s a fad me and some of the guys started.’ Weeks later, as the style persisted, I commented, ‘I can’t stand it! Every time I see that, I want to fix it for you.’ I gently tucked the tag in place and ruffled his hair. ‘Yeah,’ he said, smiling. ‘All the girls do too.’” Mom discovered that her son had a clear purpose. We studied our purpose in session one. God made us to worship him—to live life in grateful, humble service.

We go deeper into that now as we unpack our position. In short, we are stewards. When I was a green pastor, I knew that term but lacked a firm grasp on that doctrine. I will now share with you what I came to see and how it relates to significance and success.

### I. THE BIG IDEA

What is a steward? Maybe you know a ship steward or a shop steward. But those positions differ from a steward in New Testament times. Let’s explore.

#### A. IN ROMAN CULTURE

Usually, in the Roman Empire, a steward was:

- an important slave
- charged to take charge of his master’s property to the best of his ability
- ready to give an account of his service at any time

The master owned everything the steward touched and owned the steward. This kind of slave was quite important—a high-level manager. The master relied on the steward for his family’s well-being. Stewards cared for more than money. Stewards had to do their reasonable best according to individual abilities and responsibilities. Whenever the master called for a report, the steward had to be ready.

#### B. IN THE CHURCH

What about stewards in the church? We are important slaves of Christ, charged to take charge of God’s property to the best of our ability, and must be ready to give an account to Christ for our service at the time of his choice. The fundamental idea of biblical stewardship is: “To manage to make the most of life for the glory of our Maker.”

God made humans to be his estate managers on earth. That is part of being made in God’s image. How have we done? We managed to make a big mess. We exchanged the glory of the Creator for created things. By sinning, we placed ourselves under the wrath of God in this life and after.

But God made salvation. Salvation remakes us as stewards. God says to his rescued ones, “Let’s do stewardship the right way now under the influence of my grace. Let’s flush

that idolatry and pride of ownership out of your system. Let's make you good managers of all I entrust to you."

## II. A BIG DEAL

### A. THE LORD'S STEWARDSHIP PARABLE

God's eternal Son stood on earth, in the Roman Empire, and told a story about stewards in the light of eternity. The matter is a big deal. In Matt 25:14-30 he likens the kingdom of heaven to an estate.

Jesus talks about the end of history saying, "For it is just like a man about to go on a journey. He called his own servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to another one talent, depending on each one's ability. Then he went on a journey. Immediately the man who had received five talents went, put them to work, and earned five more. In the same way the man with two earned two more. But the man who had received one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five talents approached, presented five more talents, and said, 'Master, you gave me five talents. See, I've earned five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master's joy.' The man with two talents also approached. He said, 'Master, you gave me two talents. See, I've earned two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master's joy.' The man who had received one talent also approached and said, 'Master, I know you. You're a harsh man, reaping where you haven't sown and gathering where you haven't scattered seed. So I was afraid and went off and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' His master replied to him, 'You evil, lazy servant! If you knew that I reap where I haven't sown and gather where I haven't scattered, then you should have deposited my money with the bankers, and I would have received my money back with interest when I returned. So take the talent from him and give it to the one who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have more than enough. But from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. And throw this good-for-nothing servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

The Greek word for servants here is DOULOI, literally "slaves." The New Testament calls believers "slaves" (DOULOI) of God many times, especially church leaders. The Greek word for "master" here is KURIOS. The Bible calls Jesus "Lord" (KURIOS) many times. Master Jesus will return someday and call accounts concerning our use of his talents.

What are talents? People think of talents as playing the guitar, painting landscapes, juggling chainsaws, or scoring a goal in overtime. In Roman times, a "talent" was a weight measurement in the 60-pound range. Precious metals were often weighed, so "talent" became a term for money and then a metaphor for other valuable things.

In the Lord's parable, talents represent any gifts, resources, opportunities, and capabilities God entrusts to us. The Lord's story says the master distributed his resources to the

stewards “each according to his ability.” The first two stewards got a positive review and reward even though the bulk amounts at the end differed. The percentage was the same. The third one should have had the same heart as the other two and produced an equal percentage of return for the master. The result would have been a smaller bulk amount, but he would have received the same praise.

The first two stewards in the story got rewards, but the last steward got a terrible review. He was banished. Questions pop up:

- Does the story teach we are saved by our own works?”
- Can a believer be lost in the end?
- Does this story put believers in an insecure position?

The biblical answer to all three questions is “no.”

The stewardship parable is not about how God saves people. It mentions no cross or resurrection. It contains no gospel message.

The Bible explicitly teaches that rescued sinners go to heaven by the pure grace of Jesus. Nothing we can do earns forgiveness or gains eternal life. Jesus gives the gift of salvation from sin, guilt, and hell to all who ask him to apply his payment on the cross to their sins. We do not earn; we turn. I turned to him in faith that way on Easter Sunday in 1972.

Saved people will never go to hell. By faith alone, saved sinners stand on the Lord’s perfect record, so we will enjoy God and his new creation forever. That is the gospel, the good news of salvation.

The parable of the talents does not *teach* the gospel, but it *connects to* the gospel. Eph 2:8-10 tells the church, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift— not from works, so that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.”

The wicked servant in the parable, however, is described as “good for nothing.” He made excuses and mouthed off at the master. He misrepresented the master. The parable does not teach that God is harsh and unfair. The parable shows that people who are estranged from God view him in warped ways. If the master was a bad man, the other two stewards would not have served wholeheartedly. The master would not have invited slaves who simply did their job to join his joy. The third slave was self-directed, self-interested, and self-centered. He chose sloth over joy. He had a different disposition than the others and a different destination.

Saved stewards learn to appreciate Master Jesus. He paid our full entrance fee into the arena of salvation and he keeps us there. Rewards from him depend on how we manage as stewards in that arena. Jesus will reward faithful service. He does not have to. He wants to.

In the story Jesus told, some talents were larger than others, but all the amounts were big. God says that you count, so do not discount yourself. Perhaps you feel your service is not

impressive compared to, say, Billy Graham. God will not hold you accountable for doing Billy's best. He put you *where* you are, *as* you are, so that you can play your significant part.

But suppose you are a true believer but do a poor job as a steward. The parable does not address that problem but the Apostle Paul did.

## **B. THE LORD'S JUDGMENT SEAT**

The Apostle Paul talks about our pending job review in 2 Cor 5:9-10. "Therefore, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to be pleasing to him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." The Greek word for "judgment seat" is BEMA. In the ancient world, a BEMA was a place of judgment used in legal and athletic contexts. Paul is saying that saved people can get a positive or negative review at the Lord's BEMA.

Paul uses himself as an example in 1 Cor 3:10-15. "According to God's grace that was given to me, I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder, and another builds on it. But each one is to be careful how he builds on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, each one's work will become obvious. For the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; the fire will test the quality of each one's work. If anyone's work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will experience loss, but he himself will be saved—but only as through fire."

A real Christian can experience shame and loss at the BEMA. That will not be anything like hell, but it will hurt. Faithful Christians will be on the plus side in a way careless Christians will not. It is fine for a steward entrusted with one talent to produce one more. It is not good for a steward entrusted with five to produce one. The rewards will be for what stewards did with what they had, not with what they did not have.

Someone might protest: "I thought we would all be full of joy in heaven. How can that be if some get more reward?" Picture three buckets—small, medium, and large. I could fill each one with water and all would be full. But two would have more water than the small one. Every day, each of us is building a bucket to hold future joy. Our choices as stewards either enlarge or limit our capacity for joy. People talk about dying as "kicking the bucket." We should think about living as "expanding the bucket."

## **III. THREE BIG TRAPS**

Applied stewardship theology directs us away from three common traps.

### **A. PERFECTIONISM**

This call to do our best does not mean to live as perfectionists. In my early years as a Christian, I lived as a perfectionist. Proud people are happily self-absorbed. I chose the miserable form of self-absorption. I wasted a lot of energy fixating on every little flaw in myself, real or imagined. That fixation was bad stewardship. Donald Bloesch writes, "Our

focus should be not on ourselves—on our strengths or deficiencies—but on the sufficiency of the cross of Christ.” I learned that being a good steward ruled out both unpleasant and pleasant self-absorption.

The Lord’s parable was not designed to make Christians neurotic. After teaching the parable of the talents and stewards, Jesus headed deliberately to the cross so we would live. Go to his cross for the resources you need to live well. Those resources include the grace to move beyond failures.

The Lord’s parable was not designed to make Christian workaholics either. Making the most of life for the glory of our maker does not mean neglecting rest or feeling responsible for everything. No one is indispensable. No one is indestructible. Pushing too hard and trying to do too much is bad stewardship. Be fruitful, not frantic. Burnout is not good stewardship any more than laziness is.

I knew a pastor who pushed himself for years, never taking a vacation. He crashed and burned and had to go on an emergency sabbatical. The time on that sabbatical equaled all the normal vacations he should have taken each year. He proves a point made by John Wanamaker: “People who cannot find time for recreation are obliged sooner or later to find time for illness.”

I pose a question now to frantic, frazzled Christian workers who push too hard. The question comes from the notable theologian Billy Joel.

“Slow down you crazy child  
Take the phone off the hook and disappear for a while  
It’s alright, you can afford to lose a day or two  
When will you realize, Vienna waits for you?”

He used “Vienna” as a symbol for old age based on a personal experience. I will amend his lyrics for our purpose.

“Slow down you crazy child  
Take the phone off the hook and disappear for a while  
It’s alright, you can afford to lose a day or two  
When will you realize, the BEMA waits for you?”

## **B. SIGNIFICANCE**

An interviewer asked the crab fisherman of Deadliest Catch what they feared. One of the toughest crewmen said he feared insignificance. We all face the trap of seeking significance in what we do. People in ministry are no exception.

Only God is inherently significant. He grants us significance by his work, not ours. Gen 1:26-27 reports, “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own

image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” The “image” means we can know him as God and serve him as his stewards.

At one point in my ministry, I had served as a pastor of a local church without a gap for 22 straight years. I did a part-time interim pastorate, but for 15 months I was not the regular pastor of a church. How did I react? I discovered I felt no less significant when I was out of a position than when I was in one.

Now I am retired from a pastoral position. I still feel fine. I was talking to two believers in the business world, both with deep church backgrounds. When I told them I felt no less significant after retiring, both balked at the idea. Both invested too much in work and not enough in applied stewardship theology.

I read a memoir by a best-selling novelist. He wrote, “I was at a point in my life when I seriously considered giving up writing.” His wife said to him, “OK, my darling, who are you now?” He replied, “A writer.” She asked, “Who will you be when you retire?” He concludes, “and ever since then...the word ‘retirement’ has been banned from our vocabulary.” Suppose my wife asked me, “Who are you now that you are retired?” I would answer the same as always, “By grace, I am a worshiper of the living God.” I will never retire from that position.

Never think a pastor is significant because he is a pastor, especially if you are a pastor. I like the musical “Fiddler on the Roof.” But I dislike the part where dairy farmer Tevya is introducing the town folk like the beggar and the matchmaker. Then he says, “And most important of all our beloved Rabbi.” I was never more important than others in the congregation because I was a pastor. Never think a senior pastor is more significant than a staff pastor. I do not think I am better than you because I am a retreat speaker.

Jesus is my significance. I retired as a pastor of a church, but Jesus kept on being Lord. So my significance did not take a hit. Let me summarize what I have learned over many years.

- My practical accomplishments cannot produce my significance. My significance comes from God’s accomplishments in creation and redemption.
- If I do a good job as a steward, I make a more sizeable impact, but I do not become a more significant person.
- Even a poor steward is a significant person, which is one reason why bad stewardship is a significant problem
- My significance is not found in how my stewardship compares to others. Our assignments vary but our significance is the same in Christ.
- God calls us to work from significance, not toward it. Significance is a given, not a goal. It is the solid ground on which we stand, not a place we might or might not reach.



## C. SUCCESS

The third trap is defining success by worldly standards rather than by godly stewardship. Paul teaches about the standard for true success in 1 Corinthians 4: 1-4. "A person should think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God. In this regard, it is required that managers be found faithful. It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I don't even judge myself. For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me. So don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God."

Success is not numbers, money, power, or acclaim. Shakespear said the fifth age involved "seeking the bubble reputation." That bubble pops easily.

Success is faithfulness. God does not require that you lead a large organization, have an impressive salary, be an evangelical influencer, or get your name in conference brochures. God requires stewards to be faithful.

In 2Tim 1 Paul identifies himself as an apostle by the will of God, a herald, and a teacher. Then in 2 Tim 1:16, he mentions Onesiphorus. Paul says, "he often refreshed me." What impact would Paul have made without such stewards around him? I imagine Onesiphorus will have a big bucket of joy even though most people do not know who he is.

If one were to ask me who I would like to study under among all living Bible scholars, I would pick D. A. Carson. He has a PhD from Cambridge and has written or edited about 200 books. He has made a big impact on biblical scholarship, church service, and missions. But he does not look in the mirror for a case study of success. He looks at his dad's legacy. Rev. Tom Carson served as a small church pastor during his entire ministry. I close with D. A. Carson's tribute to his dad's obscure success as a good steward.

"Tom Carson never rose very far in denominational structures, but hundreds of people in the Outaouais and beyond testify how much he loved them. He never wrote a book, but he loved the Book. He was never wealthy or powerful, but he kept growing as a Christian: yesterday's grace was never enough. He was not a far-sighted visionary, but he looked forward to eternity. He was not a gifted administrator, but there is no text that says, 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you are good administrators.' His journals have many, many entries bathed in tears of contrition, but his children and grandchildren remember his laughter. Only rarely did he break through his pattern of reserve and speak deeply and intimately with his children, but he modeled Christian virtues to them. He much preferred to avoid controversy than to stir things up, but his own commitments to historic confessionalism were unyielding, and in ethics he was a man of principle. His own ecclesiastical circles were rather small and narrow, but his reading was correspondingly large and expansive. He was not very good at putting people down, except on his prayer lists. When he died, there were no crowds outside the hospital, no editorial comments in the papers, no announcements on television, no mention in Parliament, no attention paid by the nation. In his hospital room there was no one by his bedside. There was only the quiet hiss of oxygen, vainly venting because he had stopped breathing and would never need it again. But on the other side all the trumpets sounded. Dad won entrance to the only throne

room that matters, not because he was a good man or a great man—he was, after all, a most ordinary pastor—but because he was a forgiven man. And he heard the voice of him whom he longed to hear saying, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord.’”

## SESSION 3 ~ OUR PRIORITIES

I begin with a question for church leaders. Do you want to “discern your ‘corporate grace’ and surrounding microculture, as well as...synthesize these into your unique Vision Pathway”? Do you long for “a Vision Integration Model” which is “a framework for retrofitting all tactical learning to your unique vision”?

Me either. I have some better things for you than that jargon from a current church growth book. We have covered our purpose and our position in previous sessions. In this session we address priorities.

Did you dread any subject in your school days? For me, the clear answer is math. Math class tortured me even before algebra entered my life. Then a teacher hit me with  $2+X = 4$ . She dragged the alphabet into the mess! I won't talk about physics class, or I might have flashbacks and fall into the fetal position.

Some people like math, to which I say, “Go figure.” I promise to stay out of the way while they balance the books, design video games, or launch rockets. But even I can handle  $2+2=4$ . When people want to say something is simple, they say, “It is as simple as  $2+2 = 4$ .” The message I want to give you today is this. Basic church ministry is as simple as 242.

### I. WHAT I WANTED TO BE

My earliest ambition was to drive a street cleaner—the tall version of the machine with three wheels and a big brush in front. I saw one of those as a child and figured it was the coolest job possible. I still would love to give it a try.

In high school I wanted to be an architect until I met with one and found out about tons of codes, troubleshooting with contractors, and such. So I designed an escape into music as a college trumpet major. After two years, I switched to Bible and settled in. I became a pastor and served for the long haul.

I wanted to be a good pastor. So I read the usual ministry books, went to seminars, and spent a lot of time in pastor affinity groups. I did that for decades.

Many books, seminars, and fellow pastors said I was doing what I was supposed to do. I had measurable success doing those things. However I failed to see significant problems with the usual approach to church ministry.

### II. WHAT I DID NOT SEE

I did not see how my success was my weakness. I did well leading program-rich churches. One bad part was the many activities I designed, led, or encouraged crowded out one vital thing: corporate prayer.

“Corporate?” Not like IBM, Amazon, Apple, and Coca-Cola. The English word comes from the Latin “corpus” which means “body.” The Bible calls the church “the body of Christ.” Saved sinners are vitally connected to one another and to Jesus as a living body.

So in true corporate prayer people put aside constant division by groups based on age, life-stage, gender, marital status, ministry task, etc. to pray as the body. Corporate prayer puts a hold on divvy-up ministry. The body prays as members of a whole, vitally connected entity.

All the ministry books, seminars, and pastors' affinity groups had one thing in common: they had virtually nothing to say about corporate prayer. There is almost no body-oriented prayer in American churches. Some people pray in some groups, but the church as a whole body rarely prays all together.

### III. WHAT I CAME TO SEE

We now turn to the only inspired church growth book. I came to see that a great model for ministry had been staring me in the face all along. I discovered that Bible scholars across many church traditions and through many centuries have recognized Acts 2:42 as a prescription for priorities. Here are some examples

- “Do we look for the true church of Christ? It is pictured here... In these four things Luke describes the well-ordered state of the church. We must keep to these things if God and the angels are to judge us as the true church and not just boast to be such before men.” John Calvin
- “Verse 42 is regularly cited as the earliest description of four central elements in Christian worship, which should characterize the church as it gathers in any time and place.” Craig L. Blomberg
- “Here we have a brief description of the religious life of the first Christian congregation. All the essentials are present and are in proper order and harmony. The church has always felt that this is a model.” Richard Lenski
- “The church has drifted far from the simplicity of worship of the Early Church. Did not the Spirit inspire those first disciples to set forth a pattern of worship for all ages?” Herbert Lockyer

I am planning a book on this topic, so I studied this text in all the Acts commentaries at a seminary library. It took a long time. Many more examples are in the supplemental note section. Those are only a sample of what I found saying Acts 2:42 is a prime ministry model.

The scholarly consensus is overwhelming. I have not found one scholar who says Acts 2:42 is not a model for ministry priorities. I also have not found one consultant, church growth book, or seminar that says it is. There is a massive disconnect between competent evangelical scholarship about Acts 2:42 and evangelical church practice in America.

Acts 2:42 shows us a healthy body using a simple but profound model. That is why I said the ministry is as “Simple as 242.”

The church prayed together after Jesus ascended, as he directed. Then Jesus sent the Holy Spirit in a new way. Peter preached the gospel on Pentecost. See what followed his

sermon by looking at Acts 2:41-47. “So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added to them. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Someone might balk and say, “Not so fast! What about Acts 2:44-45 being a prescription for today? Why not say we must sell our possessions and property and put the proceeds to common use? Why focus on verse 42?”

The answer is that verse 42 forms the model. The verses that follow display some ways the Jerusalem church embodied the model at that time. The communal form of property pooling found in Acts 2 does not appear again in the New Testament after Acts 5. Generosity does. All the basics in Acts 2:42 continue throughout the New Testament.

Consider the form in which Luke wrote Acts 2:42. In the Greek text, Luke uses the word “the” six times to unpack their devotion. The original says, “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers.” Consider closely what that means.

## **A. THE TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES**

The people did not devote themselves to some attractive teachings from some favorite apostles. They devoted themselves to “the teaching of the apostles.” They took to heart all the God-given revelation that came through all the apostles.

The core of the teaching of the apostles is the gospel, but their teaching embraced the whole Old Testament and all that we find in the New Testament.

To devote ourselves to the teaching of the apostles today requires that we affirm and properly apply the whole Bible. God calls disciples, he does not hire editors.

That means we must declare some hard truths. Peter’s Pentecost sermon sliced and diced his hearers’ hearts as he told the necessary truth. He told them they killed the Messiah and that God raised him up as the judge.

What Peter did with that crowd was a church marketing nightmare! In the process, God saved 3,000 people. The church devoted itself to all of God’s truth and it grew.

The worst outcome is when a church waffles on truth and sees apparent success. Nothing fails like false success. Nothing succeeds like steadfast faithfulness.

## **B. THE FELLOWSHIP**

Luke uses a noun, not a participle or verb. The text does not say they “fellowshipped” or they were devoted to “fellowshipping.” It says they devoted themselves to “the fellowship.”

The fellowship is the people, not an activity. The fellowship is the group formed by the teaching of the apostles. The people of God devoted themselves to the people of God. Therefore, they saw many conversions. They were not inward-focused. They were influential as a untied, upward-focused body.

The text does not say, “They devoted themselves to evangelism.” Their devotion to one another, however, gave weight to their witness. It says the church grew because the church was devoted to the church! Take an example from Galatians 6:9-10. Paul tells the church: “Let us not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don’t give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith.” In Jn 13:35, Jesus told his disciples: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Showing special love for those in the body is the Lord’s church growth plan.

### **C. THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD**

In Greek, Acts 2:42 says they “devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread.”

The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are two parts of a single story. At the end of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus breaks the bread at the Last Supper to picture his death. After the resurrection, two disciples met Jesus but were kept from recognizing him. He broke bread, and their eyes were open to who he was. It is a short walk from Luke 24 to Acts 2. If you read the two parts together, you see Acts 2:42 is about the Lord’s Table as a Christ-centered fellowship. It focuses directly on the gospel.

I was surprised to learn that many evangelical churches have communion services once or twice a year. While the Bible does not prescribe frequency, that does not seem like exemplary devotion. Even if we take it more often, the goal is to prepare our hearts to come as humble, hungry worshipers.

You might wonder why baptism is not mentioned along with the table in Acts 2:42. Baptism is a one-time ordinance for the believer. It is in the context of Acts 2 but not in Acts 2:42 because the verse is about activities each member of the body did repeatedly.

### **D. THE PRAYERS**

Acts 2:42 says they devoted themselves to “the prayers.” The definite article and the plural noun indicate normal, regular sessions of prayer for the whole, gathered group.

The word “together” occurs again and again in Acts 2:41-47. It forms the context for all four parts of Acts 2:42. They gathered as one to listen to the apostles, to celebrate the Lord’s Table, and to build up the fellowship. Solo or small group praying is fine, but it is not what Acts 2:42 is about.

They prayed together in emergencies. See what happened after Peter and John were imprisoned for preaching Jesus. Look at Acts 4:23-24: “After they were released, they went

to their own people and reported everything the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together to God and said, “Master, you are the one who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and everything in them.” It is possible that this happened in one of the regular sessions rather than one specially called. When a church gathers regularly all kinds of situations can be addressed in prayer.

The Greek text says, “with one mind, they lifted voice to God.” The word “voice” is singular. The whole fellowship had one voice through their many prayers in one gathering. Acts 4:24 shows a whole church praying together. God’s prayer program for the church is as simple as 424.

The evangelical church body has lost its voice. I am sorry to say that I helped produce that result. I offered so many ministries and events to people that I strangled the body’s voice. I meant well, but that is not good enough. I have mended my ways.

That is why I wrote my first book. It includes practical ways of making changes to prioritize corporate prayer. I will never write one more important.

Pastor Sinclair Ferguson told an interviewer what bothered him about the church today. “There is the lack of prayer and of the Church praying. This is to me the most alarming, for this reason: we have built apparently strong, large, successful, active churches. But many of our churches never meet as a congregation for prayer. I mean never! What does that indicate we are saying about the life of the Church as a fellowship?” It says we think we can do things without corporate prayer. It says we have let apparent success fool us.

One of the unlikely books I encourage young pastors to read is *All Creatures Great and Small* by James Herriot. He models how to serve others. One of the stories is fitting for a dairy region like Wisconsin. Herriot writes about Sigfried, the head of the veterinary practice. “Siegfried once told me he had spent half a morning trying to stuff a uterus up a cow’s rectum.” You did not expect to hear that in this retreat did you? Herriot continues, “What really worried him, he said, was that he nearly succeeded.”

The church should not be able to succeed without corporate prayer. It seems to be the last thing we want to do in churches in America. Not so in other parts of the world today.

The last thing that Satan wants to see is a church body enthusiastically and obediently embracing corporate prayer. The enemy has given us more trouble than we need, especially harming our children and youth. If we pray together more, with our children and youth included, we will give Satan more trouble than he can handle. Please do.

Megan Hill writes, “I can think of no better—or simpler—discipleship program than for more mature and less mature believers to sit diligently under the preaching of the Word and then to pray together. I can also think of nothing more exciting. This was how you first learned the faith, this was how the members of the early church grew (Acts 2:42), this was how Christ is even now conforming to himself the saints in Korea and the saints in my own church, and it is how those around you will come to maturity too. Brothers and sisters, are you ready?”

Good question. Here are a few more. When do 7-year-olds in your church hear you pray? When do you hear them pray? How about 18-year-olds? 80-year-olds? When was the last time you prayed with a group spanning many demographic categories?

When I was a green steward I provided the church with plenty of programs. Kids over there, youth there, singles there, seniors there, etc. To a degree that was fine, but to a large degree it lured them from the priority of prayer *by the body as the body*. I meant well, but I now regard that as the biggest mistake I ever made as a pastor.

#### IV. WHAT WE MUST BE

Be as simple as 242. Be devoted as the early church was in the bloom of health in Acts 2:42. The goal is not to be the first-century church. It was often sick. The goal is to adopt the orientation it had when healthy in Acts 2:42. Richard John Neuhaus is right when he says, "Our restless discontent should not be over the distance between ourselves and the first-century Church but over the distance between ourselves and the Kingdom of God, to which the Church, then and now, is witness." Acts 2:42 records a healthy church simply manifesting kingdom life.

The evangelical church in America has made ministry far too complicated. Here is an example. The author of a church growth book tells me why I should read his book. I borrowed phrases from it in the introduction to this session. Here is his description of his book: "It presents ideas on how to discern your 'corporate grace' and surrounding microculture, as well as how to synthesize these into your unique Vision Pathway. More than that, it gives you a Vision Integration Model. This model is a framework for retrofitting all tactical learning to your unique vision." His book overflows with templates as well as buzzwords. It even has equations. Not math again! His book is not as simple as 242.

Another book is by a leader in the Church Growth Movement. The author laments the fact that less than 1% of American churches are growing. On the very next page, he says why the Church Growth Movement is so important. He claims that the movement is responsible for half of the growth churches have seen. Think about that. He commends his approach based on 1/2 of a 1% growth rate!

He charts the way forward with page after page of demographic studies, interventions, structures, marketing, and breakthrough projects. The book bombards us with terms like "SWOT analyses, target population, relevance theory, contextualization theory, theory of the sublime, homogeneous units, human emotion theory, and symbolic interactionism." He refers to Machiavelli, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and even Carl Jung. How many Bible passages does he quote or even cite the references to? Zero. He does not give us the Apostle Peter; he gives us Peter Drucker.

The author never considers how the church in America might have grown in power and size if we spent less time on strategy, metrics, market analysis, and vision casting and made the 242 basics our priority.

Please don't misunderstand. I am not against programs and affinity groups. I am against programs getting in the way of priorities. I am all for programs making breathing space for prayer by the body.



Simple as 242 does not mean as easy as 1,2,3. Prayer is hard on the flesh. Beware. If you try to regain these priorities in a local church, some people will not be happy. Some will leave. We have created the evangelical program beast and it likes to be fed. If we cut back on programs to make room for corporate prayer, it will get hangry. Moving toward top priorities will not be easy. It will be worth it.

Acts 2:43 says the apostles did many miracles. The church's devotion in Acts 2:42 was not one of the miracles. No apostle went, "Zap! You're all devoted!" Devotion was a daily resolution from the hearts of all the people, even while suffering persecution and death. Devotion is demanding. Jesus is deserving.

I cannot devote you. You cannot devote me. But we can devote ourselves.

We must get back to basics. In 1963 A. W. Tozer saw the problem. It has only gotten worse. He wrote, "Right now we are in an age of religious complexity. The simplicity which is in Christ is rarely found among us. In its stead are programs, methods, organizations and a world of nervous activities which occupy time and attention but can never satisfy the longing of the heart. The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship, and that servile imitation of the world which marks our promotional methods all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all. When will we come to the point of repentance, throw all the excuses out the window and fall on our faces before God and an open Bible? When will we repent of our sin and allow the Holy Spirit to do whatever the Holy Spirit wants to do?"

Even people with a lot of experience can stray from basics. Take a musical case in point.

Phil Smith was the principal trumpet of the New York Philharmonic for decades. I was in the audience in Avery Fischer Hall when he played the Bach Brandenburg concerto #2 in 2009. It is one of the most demanding pieces for trumpet. His playing was mistake-free, powerful, and beautiful. I was grateful that I witnessed the stellar performance in person.

Four years after that concert, Phil Smith could not make a sound on the trumpet. The problem began with an air leak on the side of the mouth. So he did all the things he thought he should do. He worked harder and harder. In the end, he realized he was adding tension to tension. He said, "I got like this [tight, clamped lips]."

He turned to a trombone player named Jan Kagarice. She helps brass players deal with the problem of embouchure focal dystonia. His new coach said to him, "Anything you think you know about brass pedagogy [teaching and playing theory] is going out the window. You're going to have to trust me." Smith said, "Boy, that was a journey of trust."

Here is how her guidance began. She had him blow a stream of air through a coffee stirrer. That is all. No sound. Just a relaxed breath. When he was good at that, the next part was blowing a stream of air through an average-sized straw. Again, no sound. Then when ready, he moved on to use a large straw.

In the next phase, he started to make a sound with the mouthpiece. He said the sound was like a duck call. The point was not beauty and power, but basic airflow. He said, "When that first came out, that was kind of cool."

Eventually, he regained his playing ability. Today, he plays beautifully and teaches trumpet at the University of Georgia. Phil Smith said, "It took someone to take me back to learn to [sound of blowing out]." His body forgot how to breathe. The church body has often done likewise. The body needs to go back to moving air by corporate prayer. The over-programmed American church is literally breath-taking. It is time to get back to simple basics.

The Holy Spirit inspired Acts 2:42 so we would know God wants us to pray together as one, love the fellowship, come humbly to the table, and embrace all the apostle's taught. As we ponder Acts 2:42, perhaps the Spirit is saying to us, "Anything you think you know about church ministry is going out the window. You're going to have to trust me." Are you ready for the journey of trust?

## SESSION 4 ~ PUTTING IT TOGETHER

This last session has two parts. In the first part, I will use two sheets I have produced to summarize important elements of God-centered ministry.

### I. BACK TO PURPOSE

See the sheet, “The Church and Purpose” on p.75.

See the sheet, “The Beginning & the End of Church Ministry” on pp.76-77

### II. BOW IN PRAYER

S. D. Gordon said, “You can do more than pray after you have prayed but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.” American church folks typically do a lot. But, by Gordon’s maxim, we often do not do more than pray. Ministry is beyond our capability. My maxim is: when you are trying to do what you cannot do, the first thing to do is pray.

I once attended a multi-day conference on corporate prayer on the campus of an American seminary. Various church leaders spoke, some nationally known. We listened to sermons, we sang hymns, we heard book recommendations, and we had coffee. Guess what we never did during that whole prayer conference? Pray together.

Talking about prayer is not the same thing as talking to God in prayer. We need to change.

Hebrews 4:14-16 says: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.” The word “pray” does not appear in those three verses but the context (chapters 2-5) makes it clear that prayer is the way to appear before the throne to find help. This is a call for a congregation to prayer together.

I have seen many churches go through very difficult times and still not turn to corporate prayer. They seek solutions for a faltering ministry in everything but humble pleading before the throne. Churches turn to consultants, an interim pastor, a new pastor, a vision statement, the latest seminar, and exciting programs, but do not gather regularly for prayer.

The best helper is still on the throne. How often do we hear the invitation in Hebrews 4:16 as a congregation? That is the Biblical context. How often does the assembly accept the invitation from the throne to receive the help we need? How often do we ask the helper to purge us of contaminants like individualism, pragmatism, and consumerism?

We need to pray especially when things are going well. Paul got an encouraging report about the Colossian church and wrote this: “...since the day we heard this, we haven’t stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his

will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, so that you may have great endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light" (Col 1:9-12).

I can think of no better way of ending this series than having us pray together about what we have learned from God's word.

## PRAYER TIME

## FAREWELL

Hebrews 13:6-8 tells the church, "Therefore, we may boldly say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?' Remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you. As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

I am not your leader. But I have presented the word of God to you. Use it well.

To whatever degree I have grown sage, do as I do. But remember, God alone is fully sage. He has all wisdom. He is perfect. Do as he says.

I close these sessions with the Apostle Paul's words *of* wisdom *about* wisdom found in 1Cor 3:18-23. "Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become 'fools' so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again, 'The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.' So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."

## THE SEVEN LETTERS OF REVELATION 2-3 AND CHURCH HEALTH

In the second and third chapters of Revelation, we find the Lord's assessment of seven churches. The letters were written to real places in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Many churches hire consultants to do assessments. Here Jesus takes the initiative and provides assessments.

Each of the Lord's seven letters starts with the phrase, "to the angel of the church in..." (2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14). Church life is not just a matter of concern to church people (Eph 3:10-11, 1Pet 1:12). Church life goes beyond what we like and do in a church. Spiritual beings are present that make the church much more than a human club or charitable organization.

The churches receive evaluation from Jesus. The results are:

- Healthy: Smyrna, Philadelphia.
- Unhealthy: Sardis, Laodicea.
- Mixed: Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira.

Sadly, only two get a clean bill of health from the Great Physician.

Some interpreters say that the letters went to those regions but also portray seven periods of church history from the apostles to the end of the church age. Some good scholars hold this view, but I cannot join them. Believers during John's time lived with the expectation that Jesus could come for them at any moment. If these letters are prophecies of seven church periods, those believers should have known that they were six historical periods away from the Lord coming for his people. This view focuses too much on western church history as it reads letters written to churches in the ancient near east. It also sees periods too simply. It marks an early period as one characterized by persecution, but the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw more persecution than all of the previous centuries combined. The seven churches might share similarities with historical periods, but that is not the same as symbolizing seven periods of church history. We find a lot of prophecy in Revelation, but not every part is predictive.

Each letter says, "he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). The text does not say, "he who finds these letters interesting or helpful, let him hear." It commands each of us to pay attention. The letter to the church in Sardis says Jesus will acknowledge the name of each of his followers. Your reaction counts. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "The individual must realize that his hours of aloneness react upon the community. In his solitude he can sunder and besmirch the fellowship, or he can strengthen and hallow it."

The overarching message of the letters is that every church must pay attention to what the Spirit is saying, so we can honor the Son, to the glory of the Father. The letters are especially Christ-centered so the message to every church is "Be Christ-centered." That is the true yardstick for measuring the ministry of the local church in any period. Yet almost none of the many books, seminars, and consultants I have encountered mention the letters to the churches in Revelation. God's word does not say, "He who wants to be part of a hot

church, let him hear what the hot seminar says to the churches.” Seminars are fine in their proper place, but must not take the place of directions from Jesus. We must not allow even our good intentions to distract us from the Lord’s revealed standards.

In each of the seven letters Jesus declares, “I know your....” Sam Storms gives a sobering exhortation to us all: “How dare we build our programs and prepare our messages and hire our staffs and discipline our members as if he were distant or unaware of every thought, impulse, word, or decision? How dare we cast a vision or write a doctrinal statement or organize a worship service as if the Lord whose church it is were indifferent to it all! Do you care what Christ thinks of the church? Or are you more attuned to the latest trend in worship, the most innovative strategy for growth, the most ‘relevant’ way in which to encourage the surrounding culture?”

When Christians found out I was a pastor, they usually asked the same question: “How big is your church?” When people considered visiting the church, they often asked: “What programs do you have for me?” People rarely asked the most important questions: “How vibrant and well attended are your congregational prayer meetings? Do you preach hell as you preach the gospel? Can the young people defend the gospel in our culture? Do the people represent the gospel well to neighbors in need? Does the church have godly elders? How disciplined are the people? Do the people give like good stewards? How rare is complaining and gossip? How do the people express love for the Lord and one another?”

Notice a remarkable aspect of the Lord’s letter to the Ephesian church. In Rev 2:4-5 Jesus says, “But I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then how far you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” The Lord threatened to remove the Ephesian lampstand because they were drifting from God-centered church life and ministry. Jesus does not hide a lamp under a bushel, but he does remove lampstands. He does close churches. If reaching people was the supreme purpose of the church, Jesus would not do that. If the lamp goes, so does outreach. Popular church growth books make that sound like the ultimate disaster. God’s book says a church drifting from him is worse. Jesus is about more than plucking people from hell. He is about making a God-centered church.

Do we think that evangelical churches in America automatically do better than the ones in ancient Asia? Do we think popular ministry trends, which come and go rapidly, guarantee long-term health? Do we think we can fast forward to health? We cannot afford those ideas.

God sees a local church as a whole, with a certain character. Pay attention to the phrase “you have” in the letters. The Lord says that to the Ephesian church seven times. It indicates corporate responsibility for the health of the church. The leaders only bear part of the responsibility for the church. T. Scott Daniels writes, “Change takes place in the church not simply by altering the visible structures of the institution, such as changing pastoral staff, instituting new programs or modifying the style of worship, but by altering the spirit or the core essence of the entity as a whole.” How often do believers today see that as the prime agenda?

Consider the letter to the church at Pergamum. Jesus writes, “But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. So repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” He calls the whole church to repent. Jesus likewise tells the church at Sardis, “I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before me.”

In other cases, the “have” formula applies to commendation. Jesus told the church in Philadelphia, “I know your works. Look, I have placed before you an open door that no one can close because you have but little power; yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” The weak church received no criticism.

One thing is clear from these letters—it is easy to incorrectly assess a church if you do not keep the Lord’s standards in view. Jesus sternly warned the Laodicean church even though it appeared to be quite successful both to insiders and outsiders. Jesus praised the Philadelphia church even though it appeared weak. I wonder which congregation was more surprised by these assessments.

What about the local church where “you have” responsibility as a member? What do you think the Lord would commend in your case? What do you think he would call you to correct?

One of the most encouraging aspects of the letters is the Lord’s statement “As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be zealous and repent.” None of us can plumb the depth of the Lord’s love. In his mercy, repentance is the simple solution when we stray.

Remember these letters whenever you evaluate the ministry of a church and your part in it. The Lord has given us a rich resource in these letters to learn what he values in a church. He is patient and ready to help all who seek his truth and grace.

## QUOTES ABOUT MINISTRY AND OUR MAIN PURPOSE

*This collection of quotations provides contrasting perspectives about ministry. The issue is the main purpose of church ministry. The two parts present two divergent approaches.*

*The authors in Part 1, "On Purpose," show how a God-centered perspective on the purpose of the church drives all faithful living and ministry. The upward focus of worship provides the perspective and power for us to serve people inside and outside of the church. The quotes in the first section are some of the best material I have found about living on purpose.*

*The authors in Part 2, "Off Purpose," mean well, but have lost sight of the main purpose of the church. Church growth books can include helpful material, but too often lean toward human-centered, time-bound ministry models and action. This is especially true regarding the common contemporary call to be "outward-focused." Making evangelism the main purpose of the church ironically harms outreach. As you read section two note catch-phrases, cloudy rhetoric, horizontal focus rather than upward focus, and the exclusion of key elements in certain lists. Notice also that worship becomes one of various pursuits rather than the driver of all pursuits, timebound or eternal. Purpose is presented as something we define more than discern through careful examination of God's word. The relationship is not made clear between ministry purposes (like evangelism or justice) and worship as the main purpose for our existence. The material in the second section wanders off purpose more as the quotes proceed.*

*God's word is the only flawless writing. Test all authors (including me) by God's perfect Scriptures.*

### PART 1 ON PURPOSE

"Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." The Westminster Assembly

"We are called to an everlasting preoccupation with God." A. W. Tozer

"To set forth a proper ecclesiology, we must view the church from the perspective of God's wider purposes. Doing so brings us immediately to the conclusion that the church exists for God's glory." Stanley Grenz

"We do not know much about the kind of life we will enjoy in eternity. But we do know that God will be at the center of the kingdom of heaven. The God-centered life is spirituality as it is meant to be. It is how we were made to live. It is how we will soon be living for eternity, freed from all our present inward restraints. If God is the central reality of our lives, and if our main purpose in living is 'to glorify Him and to enjoy Him for ever,' then it is only realistic for us to live our lives increasingly with God at the center." Richard Lovelace



“I was yet to learn that in the overall strategy of the Almighty, the immediate objectives before the servants of God are not to be confused with the ultimate ends of God Himself.”  
Geoffrey Bull

“Red pottage gluts man’s vision as hungry from the hunt of life he lifts his petty bowl of present things and lets his birthright go.” Geoffrey Bull

“Whatever we desire, whatever we love, whatever we find worth suffering for, will be Dead Sea fruit in our mouths unless we remember that God comes first.” Joy Davidman

“The primary purpose of the church is worship. The Bible knows humans not primarily as *Homo sapiens* (knower) or *Homo faber* (worker) but as *Homo orans* (worshiper). Humans as humans worship. Worship is at the center of the church’s existence. The affirmation and praise of God is the wellspring of all else in the church.” Ben Gill

“In fact, the primary reason that God called us into the assembly of the church is that as a corporate assembly we might worship him.” Wayne Grudem

“But what worship means is the submission of the whole being to the object of worship. It is the opening of the heart to receive the love of God; it is the subjection of the conscience to be directed by Him; it is the declaration of need to be fulfilled by Him; it is the subjection of desire to be controlled by Him; and, as the result of all these together, it is the surrender of will to be used by Him. It is the total giving of self.” William Temple

“Sin has many manifestations but its essence is one. A moral being, created to worship before the throne of God, sits on the throne of his own selfhood and from that elevated position declares ‘I AM.’ That is sin in its concentrated essence; yet because it is natural it appears to be good. It is only when in the gospel the soul is brought before the face of the Most Holy One without the protective shield of ignorance that the frightful moral incongruity is brought home to the conscience.” A. W. Tozer

“Born with a severe case of spiritual scoliosis, our spines are twisted so that all we can see are our own immediate felt needs, desires, wants, and momentary gratifications. But the gospel makes us stand erect, looking up to God in faith and out to the world and our neighbors in love and service. Not every piece of news can do that, but the gospel can. It is interesting that the biblical writers chose the word ‘gospel.’ The heart of most religions is good advice, good techniques, good programs, good ideas, and good support systems. These drive us deeper into ourselves, to find our inner light, inner goodness, inner voice, or inner resources. Nothing *new* can be found inside of us. There is no inner rescuer deep down in my soul; I just hear echoes of my own voice telling me all sorts of crazy things to numb my sense of fear, anxiety, and boredom, the origins for which I cannot truly identify. But the heart of Christianity is Good News. It comes not as a task for us to fulfill, a mission for us to accomplish, a game plan for us to follow with the help of life coaches, but as a report that someone else has already fulfilled, accomplished, followed, and achieved everything for us. Good advice may *help* us in daily direction; the Good News concerning Jesus Christ *saves* us from sin’s guilt and tyranny over our lives and the fear of death. It’s Good News because it does not depend on us. It is about God and his faithfulness to his own purposes and promises.” Michael Horton

“The church is not merely a means to the greater end of something else, even the kingdom. It lies at the heart of history because it has been on God’s heart from eternity. The church doesn’t merely aid in the advance of the kingdom; it is the kingdom as it expands throughout the earth.” Michael Horton

“The invitation to worship God is the highest privilege of human beings, a privilege squandered by human rebellion but gloriously restored to us through the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ.” John Risbridger

“If our purpose is to remain clear, and if it is to be the measuring stick for all we do, we must find ways of keeping it vividly before us. Christians have always found corporate worship the means of accomplishing this. That is why, in Protestant Christianity, Sunday worship in the sanctuary is central. It is for worship, more than any other thing, that the church gathers its members together. By worship we mean acknowledging the sovereignty of God, seeking to know the will of God, and offering ourselves to God. Around this center is the great educational and service program, strengthening, supporting, and expressing, but never replacing the central function of the church. Church school classes and program activities might be compared to the flying buttresses on a Gothic cathedral. They support and strengthen the sanctuary and even express some of its essential beauty. The structure would collapse without them. But they are not the sanctuary, and to treat them as such—to care for, enhance, and strengthen the buttresses—while letting the sanctuary fall into ruin is to emerge with a monstrosity. It would be an accumulation of strong supports that no longer hold anything up.” Daniel D. Walker

“Without realizing it, we have during the past century bartered the gospel for a substitute product which, though it looks similar enough in points of detail, is as a whole a decidedly different thing. Hence our troubles; for the substitute product does not answer the ends for which the authentic gospel has in past days proved itself so mighty. Why? We would suggest that the reason lies in its own character and content. It fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this is not primarily what it is trying to do.” J. I. Packer

“Worship in the New Testament is a comprehensive category describing the Christian’s total existence. It is coextensive with the faith-response wherever and whenever that response is elicited.” David Peterson

“Worship is not designed by a minister to ‘meet the needs of the people’ (as though a minister could even perceive those needs), but is an activity that can catch up all the needs, known and unknown, and respond to the paramount need of everyone, which is simply to worship God because God is to be worshiped.” Richard John Neuhaus

“To glorify something or someone is to praise, enjoy, and delight in them. When something is useful you are attracted to it for what it can bring you or do for you. But if it is beautiful, then you enjoy it simply for what it is. Just being in its presence is its own reward.” Tim Keller

“The great aim of the gospel is not to redefine us to feel wonderful about ourselves but to reorient us to God so that we lose our attentiveness to self altogether and give our attention to the most worthy object.” J. R. Vassar

“What matters most is what is real. If we are going to be whole and flourish, we must move in the direction of ultimate reality, which means we need to center our lives on the right thing. *We must glorify most what is most glorious. We must love most what is most lovely. We must value supremely what is supremely valuable.* The only way out of thinking too much about our glory, loveliness, and value is to be captured by a vision of the glorious, lovely, supremely valuable God. A vision of God’s greatness and a zeal for his clout and fame are the only things that will displace a zeal for personal clout and fame. It is this passion we see most fully in Jesus.” J. R. Vassar

“If you think you should be loved just because you are you, you missed your vocation. You should have been God.” Benedict Groeschel

“Is it megalomania for Jesus to use ‘all authority’ to make himself the most famous person in the universe? If knowing Jesus were anything less than the greatest of enjoyments, then his pursuit would be unloving. But he is the most valuable reality in the universe. Knowing him is ‘the surpassing worth’ that makes it gain to count all else loss (Phil 3:8). Therefore, it is profoundly loving for Jesus to exalt himself. He cannot love the nations without putting himself on display because it is he alone who truly satisfies the human soul. This makes God’s heart for God the deepest foundation for missions. So the bedrock of the Great Commission is most ultimately not God’s heart for the nations—amazing as that is—but God’s heart for God.” David Mathis

“Jesus Christ alone is the hope, treasure, joy, and purpose of pastoral ministry. Not church growth, not church planting, not church success, not church business, not church programs, not church activities, not church popularity. Let everything be a means to this end; the treasuring of Christ and the enjoying of his glory.” Jared Wilson

“And when God is so often spoken of as the last as well as the first [Isa 44:6; 48:12; Rev 1:8, 11, 17; 22:13], and the end as well as the beginning, what is meant (or at least implied) is, that as he is the first efficient cause and fountain from whence all things originate; so he is the last final cause for which they are made; the final term to which they all tend in their ultimate issue.” Jonathan Edwards

“When God from time to time speaks of showing mercy, and exercising goodness, and promoting people’s happiness for his *name’s sake*, we cannot understand it as of a merely subordinate end. How absurd would it be to say, that he promotes their happiness for his name’s sake, in subordination to their good; and that his name may be exalted only for their sakes, as a means of promoting their happiness; especially when such expressions as these are used: ‘For mine own sake, even for mine own sake will I do it, for how should my name be polluted?’ [Isa 48:11] and ‘Not for your sakes do I do this, but for my holy name’s sake’ [Ezek 36:22].” Jonathan Edwards

“Every need is there in order to rouse the need for God. And we need God chiefly, not as a means to an end, not to satisfy earthly need, to keep the world going, to comfort us, or to help us to the higher moral levels. We do not need God chiefly as a means even to our own holiness. But we need God for himself. He himself is the end.” P. T. Forsyth

“God is for us and our release only that we may be for Him and His service. He is for us, to help, save and bless, only that we may be for Him, to worship Him in the communion of the Spirit and serve Him in the majesty of His purpose forever. First we glorify Him, then we enjoy Him forever.” P. T. Forsyth

“To make the development of man the supreme interest of God, as popular Christianity sometimes tends to do, instead of making the glory of God the supreme interest of man, is a moral error which invites the only treatment that can cure a civilization whose religion has become so false—public judgment.” P. T. Forsyth

“We can only love man in a Christian way by loving Christ’s God more. Work for man is dependent on the soul’s supreme energy of worshipping God when we are not thinking about man, and when we forgot our own soul and its prospects in our Savior. Our Christian love of our fellow goes round by way of our Lord.” P. T. Forsyth

“The problem handled everywhere is how to reach people rather than how to teach them. The eye of the church is directed outward rather than inward, to ingathering rather than upbuilding. I speak broadly, but it seems to me that we are more preoccupied with the compass than with the content of the gospel. We scheme how to cover and capture the world’s mind rather than to develop that of the church; how to commend Christ to those who are not Christian than how to enrich him for those that are; how to extend the area of faith than how to improve its estate, like an absentee landlord who is wild for the empire. All such features mean the predominance of the extensive side of Christianity. And there are signs that this overbalance to the missionary side endangers its own end. The extensive action of Christianity grows slack because it outruns its base in the church’s intensive growth.” P. F. Forsyth

“The strength of the gathering church is the cherishing church. It can only spread from a warm and holy home. If we do not tend the altar lamps and the sacred hearth in church life, we profit the kingdom little in Christian work.” P. T. Forsyth

“Our Churches need a spirit of holiness far more than a spirit of work, and they need it for the work’s sake and the sake of love.” P. T. Forsyth

“Worship must convince us that we gain there what cannot be found anywhere else. Otherwise we could just as well visit our friendly therapist or a rock concert or whatever else uplifts our feelings. Authentic worship will teach us that we are desperate sinners, enfold us in gracious forgiveness, and empower us to go back into the world changed, eager to share God’s transforming power with our neighbors and ready to do all we can to build justice and peace in the world. Worship services exist primarily for the believers who want to worship God—though we certainly also want them to be welcoming for those who do not yet know how to worship the true God. Also, most visitors come to a worship service with a friend, and most conversions occur through the influence of a friend. Because of these truths, our primary criterion for worship with regard to individuals...is not what attracts visitors but what attracts them to lasting change and what makes members strong enough in faith to reach out to nonbelievers. We must constantly ask in planning if our worship is equipping people with the kind of character that will be eager to witness to neighbors, family members, work colleagues, or strangers.” Marva Dawn

“The external increase of the Church was a consequence of its internal growth. The mightier and purer the internal life, the more powerfully does it extend itself without. And the most successful mission is that which takes place spontaneously by the divine life of the whole community, and not by the exertions of single agents. But yet the increase from without is chiefly a work of the Lord, and a proof of His divinity; for it arises not from man who planteth and watereth, but from God who gives the increase and success (1 Cor. iii.6). This adding to the Church [Acts 2:42-47] is one of the operations of the exalted Redeemer in His Church.”  
G. V. Lechler & K. Gerok

“The Church of Christ, where the Christ Himself is the supreme revelation made,—not only through the individual lives of its members, but in its corporate capacity,—where the compassion of Christ and the life of Christ are manifest in the mutual inter-relationship of the souls forming the Christian Church, is the Church to which the weary and woebegone will turn. That is the truly influential Church. How we have degraded that word influential. We call a Church influential now [in 1924] because of the kind of people that attend it, because of the money which it raises for philanthropic objects. There was a Church in the olden days that said: ‘I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing,’ and the Master walking amid the golden candlesticks said: ‘Thou ... knowest not that thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked’ [Rev 3:14-22]. So He would say today to many Churches which we describe as influential. The influential Church is the company of loyal souls who ‘continue steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and the prayers,’ who eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, who manifest in their individual lives and corporate capacity the strength, the beauty, the glory, the compassion of the Christ [Acts 2:42-47]. Wherever there is such a Church you will find the Church that has favour with the people.” G. Campbell Morgan

“I have reflected upon the great fiction of our age, the notion of the person without a role, the idea that we are most fully moral when we have divested ourselves of all external claims upon us. The liberal self, detached from any history, any claim upon the self other than the claims one has personally chosen, does not exist. All of us are busy being determined by something – even the claim that I am living only ‘for myself’ is an externally imposed claim by contemporary American society. So the question is not, ‘Will I serve some purpose larger than myself?’, for freedom from such determination is impossible. The question is, ‘Will the master whom I serve be true or false?’” William Willimon

“Churches that actually do influence the culture—here is the paradox—distance themselves from it in their internal life. They do not offer what can already be had on secular terms in the culture. They are an alternative to it. They stand outside of its life. They stand over against it in their preoccupations, because their preoccupations are with the God of their salvation who in his holiness and grace is completely unlike anything we find in life.” David F. Wells

“...Christian faith should not be captive to anyone. It should not be defined by the interests of low culture any more than those of high. It should not be driven by the felt needs of the masses any more than by the prejudices of elites. It should not be perverted by the political warfare of race, class or gender. Christian faith should be defined and driven only by truth as this has been biblically given. More than that, it is Christian truth that should be taking captive culture both high and low, the elites and the masses, the special interests of the rich

and poor, men and women, racial minorities and majorities. Christian faith is not a tool for reaching some desired goal, be it psychological, sexual, economic, or racial. Christian faith is itself the goal, and the strife among these components in the human story should be serving as the means by which people come to it. Genuine leadership in the Church, therefore, is not a matter of finding out what everyone wants and already knows and articulating it; genuine leadership is a matter of teaching and explaining what has not been so well grasped, where the demands of God's truth and the habits of the culture pull in opposite directions. Genuine leadership is a matter of finding ways of reaching greater Christian faithfulness and offering greater Christians service. And the one flows from the other. There is no such thing as Christian service that is unfaithful to God and his truth." David F. Wells

"What is to be gained if we are so intent on reaching out to the unchurched that we then unchurch the reached?" David F. Wells

"Western evangelicalism tends to run through cycles of fads. At the moment, books are pouring off the presses telling us how to plan for success, how 'vision' consists in clearly articulated 'ministry goals', how the knowledge of detailed profiles of our communities constitutes the key to successful outreach. I am not for a moment suggesting that there is nothing to be learned from such studies. But after a while one may perhaps be excused for marveling how many churches were planted by Paul and Whitefield and Wesley and Stanway and Judson without enjoying these advantages. Of course all of us can benefit from small doses of such literature. But massive doses sooner or later dilute the gospel. Ever so subtly, we start to think that success more critically depends on thoughtful sociological analysis than on the gospel; Barna becomes more important than the Bible. We depend on plans, programs, vision statements—but somewhere along the way we have succumbed to the temptation to displace the foolishness of the cross with the wisdom of strategic planning. Again, I insist, my position is not a thinly veiled plea for obscurantism, for seat-of-the-pants ministry that plans nothing. Rather, I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight." D. A. Carson

"...much speaking and writing about the church is being done by those involved in actual ministry, rather than professional theologians. Their primary concern has been to minister to the actual people of a given time and place. Two results have been a relative de-emphasis on the theory or doctrine of the church and a tendency for practical concerns, rather than biblical teaching, to dictate the understanding of the church." Millard J. Erickson

"Probably more gets written on the Church nowadays than on any other single theological theme. Most of this writing has a practical orientation. We hear about the Church in relation to rapid social change, the Church in a secular society, the Church and reunion, the Church and mission. But, however valuable some of the insights gained in these various fields may be, they need to be guided and correlated by a theological understanding of the Church." John Macquarrie

"Any theological system that makes humanity the primary focus of God's love is a system that (ultimately) loses its need for borders or boundaries, holiness or righteousness, justice or mercy. Mercy becomes meaningless and entitlement everything. The membership lines between church and world will eventually vanish, or at least take on a vacuous and

oxymoronic function more suited to business marketing—‘Join as you are; *everyone* is special here!’ Yet the vanished line between church and world would be the least of our problems. An indiscriminate God bound to pacifying most every human whim and hankering would be the real danger. On the other hand, bowing down to God’s love for God—submitting to his glory—means being incorporated into it, sharing in it, and enjoying the most beautiful of beauties forever.” Jonathan Leeman

“...man centeredness is the cardinal moral principle of the kingdom of this world. It’s the very thing that constitutes fallen humanity as fallen humanity.” Jonathan Leeman

“Sin is more than a broken relationship, and salvation is more than a restored relationship. Sin is *an offending against majesty*, and salvation is *a restoration to the adoration of majesty*—‘having no other gods,’ in Moses’ words; ‘loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength,’ in Jesus’ words.” Jonathan Leeman

“So Jesus promises, ‘By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (John 13:35). The church’s internal work of holiness and love amongst its members is inextricably tied to its outward work of witness. We must display Christ in our corporate life in order to display Christ in our individual lives.” Jonathan Leeman

“Someone might object to this last point [that the New Testament repeatedly emphasizes caring for members of the church more than outsiders] saying that surely our love for our enemies and outsiders demonstrates a higher form of love than the love we show for insiders or family members. However, love for fellow church members *is* love for those who were once enemies. Before salvation came we were enemies of God and one another. The love that’s shared within a church is powerful precisely because it shows us the other side of God’s transformative love for his enemies. It shows the result—a bunch of former enemies not just getting along but giving themselves to one another.” Jonathan Leeman

“The one essential thing we need to remember is that the glory of God is our chief objective in life, not the winning of souls. The winning of souls always comes second to the glory of God. But God, being who He is and the kind and loving God that He is, has so arranged it that the more He is glorified, the more people are saved. So, it works better to glory God first.” A. W. Tozer

“The church’s primary purpose and goal should be, without controversy, to glorify God and enjoy Him forever (see Ephesians 1). Therefore, if evangelism, as a means, is prioritized, even in a fashion thoroughly biblical over its proper end, it becomes an idol that replaces its greatest end—the manifestation and enjoyment of God’s infinite glory. The irony of the prioritization of such a means as evangelism over the glory of God is that such promotion becomes the primary root of biblical evangelism’s dilution, if not demise. When the greatest end is relegated to a lower position than the means to that end, the greatest priority is slighted and the lesser is unduly magnified...Furthermore, it is a most essential truth in spiritual matters that the means are transitory while the ends are eternal. Evangelism by necessity will ultimately reach its own termination, while the glory of God will never end. This alone should provide sufficient knowledge about that which is to be supreme in the church today as it will be in eternity.” Roy Hargrave

“The Lord enjoins us to do good to all without exception, though the greater part, if estimated by their own merit, are most unworthy of it. But Scripture subjoins a most excellent reason, when it tells us that we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve, but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honor and love. But in those who are of the household of faith, the same rule is to be more carefully observed [Gal 6:10], inasmuch as that image is renewed and restored in them by the Spirit of Christ.” John Calvin

“Worship is the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian Church. It alone will endure, like the love for God which it expresses, into heaven, when all other activities of the church will have passed away.” William Nicholls

“Worship is not a mere function of the church, it is her *ultimate* purpose.” Orlando Costas

“Worship is the fountainhead of all ministries of the church—indeed the ‘life of the church.’” Franklin Segler

“The first business of a church, then, is not evangelism, nor missions, nor benevolence; it is worship.” W. T. Conner

“The love of God for sinners is not his making much of them, but his graciously freeing and empowering them to enjoy making much of him...The further up you go in the revealed thoughts of God, the clearer you see that God’s aim in creating the world was to display the value of his own glory, and that this aim is no other than the endless, ever-increasing joy of his people in that glory.” John Piper

“Missions is not the ultimate goal of the Church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions. It’s the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white hot enjoyment of God’s glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God. ‘The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!’ (Ps 97:1). ‘Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy!’ (Ps 67:3–4). But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can’t commend what you don’t cherish.” John Piper

“...worship is an end in itself. We do not eat the feast of worship as a means to anything else.” John Piper

“Worship is an end in itself because it is the final end for which we were created.” John Piper

“The church is first a worshiping community. Evangelism and other functions of ministry flow from the worship of the church.” Robert Webber



“In a consumerist society, worship becomes a means to an end (increasing satisfaction, albeit of the religious sense), and individualism hinders the church’s ability to be a corporate witness to the gospel.” Trevin Wax

“You cannot find excellent corporate worship until you stop trying to find excellent corporate worship and pursue God himself. Despite the protestations, one sometimes wonders if we are beginning to worship worship rather than worship God.” D. A. Carson

“Human flourishing is not human flourishing without worship in spirit and truth. If we could somehow remake the world right now into a place with healthy relationships, meaningful work, adequate provision, and equal treatment for all, a place where the good guys are on top and the bad guys get their just desserts, we would still not have heaven. We’d have Bedford Falls at the end of *It’s a Wonderful Life*—a great movie and a heartwarming story, but heaven rings out with better stuff than Auld Lang Syne. The good life might be good, but without Christ it’s not the goal of Christian mission. Worship is the end of the end of the story, not human flourishing, because a redesigned world is nothing without delight in God. This means that Christian mission must always aim at making, sustaining, and establishing worshipers.” Kevin DeYoung & Greg Gilbert

“...the typical dream for the kingdom of God that is proposed today looks unlike the vision of Revelation in one important way: There’s very little mention of the King. Emergents, church-leavers, and the missional folks have a vision for a planet without mourning, crying or pain (Rev. 21:4). But they don’t talk much about the Alpha and Omega offering the water of life there (21:6), or the fulfillment of the covenant promise that God will be our God and we will be His people (21:3,7). We don’t hear about a vision of a renewed earth that is not only free from suffering, but dazzling in its purity and holiness (21:9-21), and free from everything and everyone that is unclean (21:8, 27). Worst of all, in all the utopian dreams of the kingdom here on earth, we hear little about worshipping God and the Lamb (22:3), almost nothing about the best news of all that God will be with us as our God (21:3); He will be our light and we will reign forever and ever (22:5). This is the dream of everyone living in Christ-centered reality.” Kevin DeYoung & Greg Gilbert

“Purpose, aided by alignment between mission, vision, leadership, and strategy, will significantly drive and guide a church’s effectiveness. Otherwise, mission and purpose statements are only useful as wall art. On the other hand, alignment without a consistent connection to purpose can result in an efficient organization, but one that ultimately fails God and others. The anchor to all purposes is to glorify God. There is the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of any church. An understanding of and commitment to glorifying God keeps purity to the ‘why.’ This motive keeps us centered on pleasing God above all else.” Brad Waggoner

“Worship always must be understood theologically rather than functionally. Worship is an end in itself. To attempt the worship of God for any other purpose than glorifying God compromises worship. Worship is not meant to promote an institution, to publicize a program, or to elevate any person but to exalt God. Worship is not a self-serving experience but a God-serving endeavor.” C. Weldon Gaddy

“Efforts to build a fellowship of God’s people around a center other than the worship of God—education, witness, social service (regardless of how noble and virtuous)—can build an important, respected institution, but not a Christian church.” C Weldon Gaddy

“The entire act of Christian worship is a gift to God of the entirety of the worshipers’ lives. Christian worship is an offering of unconditional love to the God of love.” C. Weldon Gaddy

“From both within and outside, constant pressures push and pull at the church, favoring directions which, if followed, will alter its nature. Only in the ownership of God can a church keep in touch with its divinely ordained identity and the strength needed to maintain it. Persuasive arguments aimed at redefining the nature of the church are plentiful. Powerful forces are bent on establishing a new orientation for the church. The confidence and commitment to the identity of the church which come from Christian worship are essential to the successful resistance of such influences.” C. Weldon Gaddy

“In worship the church is identified as the people of God committed to the lordship of Christ. Shaped by experiences of worship, the church exists as an extension of the ministry of Jesus, a communion that is a contradiction to society.” C. Weldon Gaddy

“The worship of God is the most important activity of the people of God. Worship is the source of the church’s power to carry out its mission in the world. Worship is the only activity of the church that will persist beyond history....Scholars have composed a variety of lists that identify the major functions of a church. Some tasks are common to most descriptions of the church’s responsibilities. With near unanimity, writers conclude that the church exists for worship, evangelism (some use the term ‘outreach’) education (this may be designated ‘nurture’ or ‘discipling’), and ministry (both pastoral care for individuals and service within society). Missions is on many lists, though some writers relate missions to evangelism while others assume its inclusion in ministry. Persons with experience among larger congregations often also identify administration as a basic function of a church. However the functions of a church are enumerated, a tendency to give them equal importance must be resisted. Worship is more important than all the rest or any one of the rest. Worship is fundamental. Worship is the foundation of everything else the church is doing.” C. Weldon Gaddy

“You’ve spent so much time in strategic, local church ministry planning that you’ve lost your wonder at the sovereign Planner that guides your every moment. Many pastors seem more stimulated by the next ministry vision or the next step in the strategic plan than by the stunning glory of the grand intervention of grace into sin-broken hearts. The glories of being right, successful, in control, esteemed and secure often become more influential in the way that ministry is done than the awesome realities of the presence, sovereignty, power and the love of God.” Paul David Tripp

“When they look toward the pulpit they should see a door swing back upon its hinges and open out on the eternal world. The unseen should become plainly visible to the eye of faith. Its beauty, its holiness, its profound satisfactions should make men desire it. And they will, if we have done our work beforehand. Every preacher as he mounts the pulpit on a Sunday morning should be able to say with Jim Elliot the Auca martyr, ‘Last night... great sweeping desires for the glory of God seized upon me. O that they might hear! O that they might believe!’” Hamish Mackenzie

“But just at night, the Lord visited me marvelously in prayer; I think my soul never was in such agony before. I felt no restraint, for the treasures of divine grace were opened to me. I

wrestled for absent friends, for the ingathering of souls, for multitudes of poor souls, and for many that I thought were the children of God, personally, in many distant places. I was in such an agony, from sun half an hour high till near dark, that I was all over wet with sweat. Yet it seemed to me that I had wasted away the day and had done nothing. Oh, my dear Jesus did sweat blood for poor souls! I longed for more compassion towards them. I poured out my soul for all the world, friends, and enemies. My soul was concerned, not so much for souls as such, but rather for Christ's kingdom that it might appear in the world, that God might be known to be God in the whole earth." David Brainerd

“Lord you give the great commission:  
Go to all and preach the word  
Lest the Church neglect its mission  
And the gospel go unheard  
Help us witness to Your purpose  
With renewed integrity  
By the cross Your death has saved us  
We, from sin and death, are free

Lord You call us to Your service:  
In My name, baptize and teach  
That the world may trust Your promise  
Life abundant meant for each  
Give us all new fervor, draw us  
Closer in community  
With the Spirit's gifts empower us  
For the work of ministry

Lord You bless with words assuring:  
I am with you to the end  
Faith and hope and love restoring  
May we serve as You intend  
And amid the cares that claim us  
Hold in mind eternity  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
Heart and soul, we worship Thee!”  
Jeffery W. Rowthorn

## **PART 2 OFF PURPOSE**

“Nothing precedes purpose. The starting point for every church should be the question, ‘Why do we exist?’ Until you know what your church exists for, you have no foundation, no motivation, and no direction for ministry. If you are helping a new church get started, your first task is to *define* your purpose.” Rick Warren

“I cannot overemphasize the importance of defining your church's purposes. It is not merely a target that you aim for; it is your congregation's reason for being.” Rick Warren

“Church growth is the natural result of church health. Church health can only occur when our message is biblical and our mission is balanced. Each of the five New Testament purposes of the church [Warren lists them as outreach, worship, fellowship, discipleship, and service] must be in equilibrium with the others for health to occur.” Rick Warren

“Most evangelical churches already do the five purposes of the church—*sort of*. But they don’t do them all equally well. One church may be strong in fellowship, yet weak in evangelism. Another may be strong in worship, yet weak in discipleship. Still another may be strong in evangelism, yet weak in ministry.” Rick Warren

“Those congregations unwilling to make the Great Commission the value that drives all congregational behavior do not have access to many of the resources available to congregations committed to fulfilling the Great Commission.” Paul Borden

“In the church of Jesus Christ in our nation, our belief about the church shapes the behavior of the church’s leaders as well as Christians who are the church, the body of Christ. If leadership is crucial, the beliefs of the leaders must change if there is to be any hope of seeing changed beliefs in the body (the church). If the beliefs don’t change, the behaviors won’t change. Two questions illustrate this fundamental topic: Was the church established to be the custodian of the saints? Was the church established to carry out God’s mission of redemption? When I ask these questions, I ask them in a primary sense.” Paul Borden

“Being missional involves an understanding that leads to a clear choice. Once congregations make that choice, strategies and tactics are crucial in implementing the choice. The understanding is that God didn’t create the church for Christians (meaning that it exists primarily for their benefit in developing as disciples). God created the church to mobilize Christians to reach their world (to do that well, Christians need to develop and mature). It is a matter of purpose or mission. To use a business term, the church serves two customers: those who are already disciples and those whom the church is attempting to help become disciples. In light of this understanding, the choice is that the unbeliever is the primary customer and the believer is the secondary customer.” Paul Borden

“A missional congregation understands that its bottom-line purpose is to achieve the mission of continually making more and more new disciples for Jesus Christ and then equipping those disciples to develop and be committed to a ministry of reproduction, both individually and collectively. This purpose determines a most basic choice, which is to honor those people who are spiritually separated from God and all the needs arising from that status over those people who are already disciples of Jesus Christ.” Paul Borden

“We believe God did not design the church of Jesus Christ for Christians. Rather, we believe that God designed the church to mobilize Christians to attack the gates of hell. In other words, the church is not to be a place of safety for believers but rather a gathering place to accomplish mission. This is the biggest issue facing the church of Jesus Christ in the United States and in cultures similar to the United States. Most Christians believe their congregations exist for them. We believe the opposite, which is the main reason so many of our congregations are outward in their orientation.” Paul Borden

“Healthy congregations are outward-focused, and they maintain that focus against tremendous forces that are constantly encouraging an inward bent.” Paul Borden

“If we accept the biblical and theological concept that the church was designed for mission and that we don’t get to relax until we are with our Lord in heaven, the impossible mission becomes possible.” Paul Borden

“Failure to start at the beginning will never repair ‘what needs fixin’.” Paul Borden

“The true end of a church is to influence society so that people come to Christ and lives are transformed.” Wayne Cordeiro

“Theologian Jurgen Moltmann reminds us that the church does not *have a mission*; rather the mission *has us*.” James Emery White

“Contrary to much evidence, the church does not exist for the sake of the church. It exists for the sake of the world.” Robert Lewis

“For congregations in local communities, there are only three possible answers to this question [i.e., why does our congregation exist?]: 1.) This congregation exists for us – the people inside. 2.) This congregation exists for others – the people outside. 3.) This congregation exists for both.” John Edmund Kaiser

“If we say that our congregation is here to serve both the insider and the outsider, we are compelled to ask a follow-up question: Who will we serve *first*? Now if at this point we try to achieve the overrated virtues of balance and lack of controversy, we will discover a surprise. If we say that we will serve both groups equally, you may be sure that our congregation will wind up hopelessly focused inward. How so? Because the needs of those inside the congregation are the ones that will always be in your face.” John Edmund Kaiser

“The mission of Christ to the world comes first, and supporting the mission team comes second but not far behind. Once we profess that our congregation exists first to bring others into relationship with Jesus Christ, we have addressed the question of mission. To be a missional congregation is to be an outward-focused congregation.” John Edmund Kaiser

“Externally focused churches measure not only what can be counted but also what matters most—the impact they are having outside the four walls of the church.” Rick Rusaw & Eric Swanson

“Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church.” Darrel Guder

“The church needs to realize that mission is its fundamental identity. A nonmissional church misrepresents the true nature of the church.” Ed Stetzer & Daniel Im

“The Great Commission institutionalizes mission as the *raison d’etre*, the controlling norm, of the church.” Wilbert Shenk

“Robert Schuller was an early pioneer in wanting to understand unchurched people and adapt in ways to become an effective missionary congregation in North America. Though all the pastors and churches featured in this book have moved beyond Schuller and the

Crystal Cathedral in their apostolic approach, most of them stand on his shoulders and affirm his important formula: The unchurched people's needs will determine our programs. The unchurched people's hang-ups will determine our strategy. The unchurched people's culture will determine our style. The unchurched population will determine our growth goals." George Hunter

"In an apostolic congregation, the people are clear that the church's main business is to serve, reach, and disciple people who do not yet understand, believe, or follow Christ as Lord." George Hunter

"More and more converts out of secularity report that their assimilation into the community of faith precedes their commitment or their discovery of faith. When I ask them, 'When did you feel like you really belonged?' they often report that they felt that they belonged before they believed, and that feeling helped them believe. John Wesley observed this reality, and therefore encouraged seekers to join a Methodist class, and in three months a Methodist society, whether they yet experienced or believed anything. Wesley even saw the Eucharist as 'a converting ordinance' and welcomed seekers to find the gracious presence at the table and altar. Traditional evangelical churches more usually function by the opposite paradigm: Let people first get saved and profess faith, and then we will receive them into the fellowship circle. But increasing numbers of churches are rediscovering what Wesley knew—that the world is not stacked on the side of very many people finding saving faith, that occasional evangelical forays into the secular world do not greatly improve the odds, and that people are more likely to find faith through involvement within the Church than outside it, particularly involvement in its redemptive cells. Deiter Zander observes that, especially in the case of the Baby Buster generation, 'We need to move the line of fellowship. People used to be allowed to cross the line into fellowship only after their conversion. Today, increasingly, we must first invite people into the fellowship so they can process what being in the fellowship is all about.'" George Hunter

"Although the church engaged in many ministries and activities, helping (what I now call) 'pre-Christian' people find faith and a new life was top priority. When later I read the line from William Temple, 'The True Church is the only society on earth that exists for its nonmembers,' I realized I had been 'birthed' for a second time in a true church." George Hunter

"Christ's Great Commission is marketing in its most traditional sense. He said, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature' (Mark 16:15). The word *preach* indicates that we are to announce, publish, make known, and proclaim the gospel. Its very definition indicates one of the pillars of marketing—*promotion*." Richard L. Reising

"Do you wonder where God stands on marketing? If we understand the premise that marketing is the management of perception, we will see God's word unfold with a brilliant new light, as we understand how He worked in lives thousands of years ago to manage perceptions, just as He does today. Two thousand years ago He did it through Christ—today He works through His body. Think about it—how many times do you remember the Scriptures saying, 'Jesus perceived their thoughts, and said...'? There are over thirty references to Jesus perceiving people's perceptions and changing His ministry direction, re-communicating, or deciding to halt communications altogether. Wow, Jesus perceived (marketing word, remember?) their perception (thoughts) of Him, and He said or did

specific things to change the way people perceived Him. What Jesus did in His own ministry falls beautifully into our clarified definition of marketing.” Richard L. Reising

“Want to grow? Find out what kind of church people want and need and become that.”  
Richard L. Reising

# FIVE KEY QUESTIONS FOR CHURCH LEADERS

## 1. What will be our focus?

Some evangelical church leaders say that local churches tend to be inward-focused and should be outward-focused instead. But both the inward and outward approaches are focused on humans. Churches should be focused on God and let a God-centered orientation guide ministry to both the saved and the lost. Will we be inward, outward, or upward-focused?

## 2. What will we find in our mailbox?

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation are sobering but quite helpful. Only two churches received fully positive reviews from Jesus. Three got mixed reviews. Two received bad reviews. How can we lead our local church toward a good review? How many local churches think and teach about Jesus as a church assessor in Revelation 1-5? The message to each of the seven churches is the same—"He who has ears to hear, let him hear." To what degree will we have open ears?

## 3. What kind of engine will we have?

Will the Holy Spirit empower us as we rely on the Scriptures and prayer? Or, will we let another engine drive our efforts? How will we make the Bible central? How would that shape programs? What would a truly prayer-driven ministry look like?

## 4. Will we produce fruit?

Will we take time to be holy as leaders and spur the flock to that priority? Will we be patient (grow oranges) or pursue ease and instant gratification (make Tang)? Will we depend on God for long-term health or settle for short-term gains? Will we go beyond having a pleasant church to having a productive ministry?

## 5. Will we be good stewards?

Will we see stewardship as much more than a money issue? Will we see church ministry direction as a matter of stewardship? Will we seek the Lord about our church's particular gifts, opportunities, and passion? Will we focus on doing quality ministry and trust God for quantity? Will we desire a prestigious ministry or will we serve Jesus as important slaves by his saving grace?



## OUR CHURCH?

“Come to our church. It is so friendly.” “Please join us for worship at our church where the music is wonderful.” “Our church is just down the road. Visit us soon.” We all make such comments. It is hard to imagine not saying something similar if you feel positive about a local fellowship. “Our church” comments often emerge from family ties and express the desire for others to join the faith family. So far, so good.

Go farther. These statements can also hint at a viewpoint that has seriously damaged many local churches. Stagnation, slow decline, and even violent splits occur when attendees of a church assume improper ownership. It is fine when “our church” means “the body of believers to which we are committed.” It is faulty when “our church” means “the organization where we get to call the shots.” It is healthy when “our church” means “the united body humbly discerning the Lord’s will.” It is sick when “our church” means “the place where we get to keep things just the way we like them.”

Sound stewardship theology is crucial for health. God owns all things because he created the universe. He doubly owns believers because he has purchased us through the cross. The church is not the “Cosa Nostra” (“this thing of ours”). The church belongs to God.

When I was an associate pastor, people would sometimes ask me when I was going to get my own church. I always found that question provocative. Perhaps wisely, I avoided saying, “I will get my own church when I die and then rise from the dead in my own power.” That is how Jesus got his church, and it is the only viable way to do it. Since I have not done that, I do not have my own church. I never will, and no one else will either.

All Christians are part of the church Jesus owns. Sometimes people talk about “taking ownership” of a situation or a problem. I do not recommend using that language to refer to a commitment to a local church. It is better to talk about taking responsibility. As sole owner of every church, God gives responsibility to his people. We take it as stewards.

Church leaders must especially bear that truth in mind. When Paul addressed the elders of the Ephesian church, he exhorted them saying, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28). Even overseers are not owners since they did not buy eternal salvation with their blood. Peter also addressed elders and reflected a stewardship mentality. In 1Peter 5:1-3, he exhorted the leaders saying, “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” God entrusts the church to the leaders for purposes of sound management. The church does not belong to the leaders for purposes of personal power or gain.

What is true for the leaders is true for the entire flock. Paul told the Ephesian congregation, “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.” (Eph 1:13-14) Peter also said God owns the church. In 1 Pet 2:9, he explained, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Paul told his associate Titus that Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (Titus 2:14) It is not good to forget that Jesus calls the shots for his church. Local congregations have latitude to employ various means in order to minister the gospel, but we must always make those decisions in a spirit of humility before the one who gave himself for us in order to own us. We must seek his will, even if it puts us in new, challenging, and even uncomfortable positions.

When a church is our home, saying “our church” is natural. But we must keep a supernatural perspective. The church belongs to the resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus. No matter how many years (or decades) members spend pouring themselves into the ministry, the church still belongs to Jesus. We never reach the point where we are entitled to have things the way we want them. We are always responsible to discern the Lord's direction for the ministry. No amount of sweat equity in a local ministry replaces the blood equity Jesus invested through his cross. Believers should belong to a local church, but no church belongs to believers. Ultimately, it is his church, not ours.

## SIN AND SALVATION

ALL HAVE SINNED Romans 3:9-12, 23

THE UNSAVED EXPERIENCE CONDEMNATION AND WRATH John 3:16-18;  
Romans 1:18-32; 2 Thess. 1:5-10; 2 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 19:15-16; 20:11-15

THERE IS NO CONDEMNATION OR WRATH FOR THE SAVED Romans 5:1-11; 8:1-4, 28-39; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9

THE SAVED WILL BE WITH THE LORD FOREVER IN GLORY John 14:1-3; 1 Peter 1:3-5; Revelation 21:1-7

SALVATION IS COMPLETELY BY GRACE, NOT BY GOOD WORKS Romans 6:23, 11:6; Ephesians 2:4-10; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:3-8

GOD SAVES US BY GRACE BUT ALSO CALLS US TO A HOLY LIFE BY GRACE  
Romans 6:1-23; Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 2:11-15, 3:5-8; 2 Peter 1:1-11

WE MUST TAKE OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO GROW SERIOUSLY EVEN AS WE  
DEPEND ON GOD AND HIS GRACE Philippians 2:12-13; 1 Peter 1:13-21

WHEN THE CHRISTIAN SINS THERE IS FORGIVENESS AND HELP BY GRACE  
Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 John 1:5 – 2:6

THOUGH BELIEVERS DO SIN AND CAN BE FORGIVEN, THEY MUST NEVER  
EXCUSE SIN, THINK IT IS ACCEPTABLE, OR MAKE IT A HABIT Hebrews 12:28-29;  
1 John 1:6-7, 2:3-6, 3:1-10

A LIFE CHARACTERIZED BY SIN OR A CARELESS ATTITUDE TOWARD GOD  
CALLS INTO QUESTION THE GENUINENESS OF A PERSON'S PROFESSION AND  
CONVERSION. THE BIBLE RECOGNIZES THE REALITY OF FALSE PROFESSIONS  
AND FALSE BELIEVERS Matthew 7:15-29; Mark 4:1-20; 2 Corinthians 11:26;  
Galatians 2:4; Titus 1:1, 10-16, 2:11-14, 3:3-8; 2 Peter 1:10-11, 2:1-22; 1 John 2:19,  
3:9-10

GOD DISCIPLINES AND JUDGES HIS CHILDREN SO THAT THEY WILL NOT BE  
CONDEMNED 1 Corinthians 11:27-34; Hebrews 12:1-4

A PERSON WHO IS TRULY SAVED WILL CONTINUE IN A LOVING, OBEDIENT  
RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST John 8:31-32, 10:27-29; 1 Corinthians 6:9-20;  
Colossians 1:22-23; Hebrews 3:12-14, 10:19-39

THE QUALITY OF THE BELIEVER'S LIFE AND SERVICE FOR CHRIST WILL BE  
TESTED

1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10

GOD REWARDS THOSE WHO ARE FAITHFUL Matthew 25:1-30; Luke 6:20-23; 1 Corinthians 9:23-27; Ephesians 6:7-8; Colossians 3:23-24; 2 Timothy 4:7-8

WE MUST ALWAYS DEPEND ON CHRIST AND TRUST GOD FOR EVERY GOOD THING WE NEED John 15:1-17; Colossians 1:9-11; 2 Thess. 1:11-12; 1 John 2:24-29

## QUOTES ABOUT STEWARDSHIP

“There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, ‘This is mine! This belongs to me!’” Abraham Kuyper

“To think that you are your own, or at least at your own disposal, is as absurd as to think that you created and you can preserve yourself.” William Law

“If you are a Christian, you are not your own. Christ has bought you at the price of his own death. You now belong doubly to God: He made you, and he bought you. That means your life is not your own. It is God’s. Therefore, the Bible says, ‘Glorify God in your body.’ God made you for this. He bought you for this.” John Piper

*“Our primary calling as followers of Christ is by him, to him, and for him. First and foremost we are called to Someone (God) not to something (such as motherhood, politics, or teaching) or to somewhere (such as the inner city or Outer Mongolia). Our secondary calling, considering who God is as sovereign, is that everyone, everywhere, and in everything should think, speak, live, and act entirely for him.”* Os Guinness

“We may retire from our jobs but never from our calling. We may at times be unemployed, but no one ever becomes uncalled.” Os Guinness

“In a sense I am a steward whether I want to be or not, since it is a fact that I have nothing of my own. Everything has been received from God. But God wants me to be a conscious, willing steward—to receive everything from His hand thankfully, to acknowledge my complete dependence, and to return everything joyfully back to Him to His everlasting praise and glory. Not my own! That is the essence of stewardship—to be conscious at all times that *all* I am and have is a sacred trust from God through the Lord Jesus Christ my Savior and to rejoice unreservedly in that consciousness. One day we shall all stand before the Lord Jesus Christ to give an account of our stewardship. The efforts—and even the trials—of this present time will seem insignificant then in comparison to His approval.” Albert Martin

“The humans are always putting up claims to ownership which sound equally funny in Heaven and in Hell and we [demons] must keep them doing so. Much of the modern resistance to chastity comes from men’s belief that they ‘own’ their bodies—those vast and perilous estates, pulsating with the energy that made the worlds, in which they find themselves without their consent and from which they are ejected at the pleasure of Another! It is as if a royal child whom his father has placed, for love’s sake, in titular command of some great province, under the real rule of wise counsellors, should come to fancy he really owns the cities, the forests, and the corn, in the same way as he owns the bricks on the nursery floor. We produce this sense of ownership not only by pride but by confusion. We teach them not to notice the different senses of the possessive pronoun—the finely graded differences that run from ‘my boots’ through ‘my dog,’ ‘my servant,’ ‘my wife,’ ‘my father,’ ‘my master’ and ‘my country,’ to ‘my God.’ They can be taught to reduce all these senses to that of ‘my boots,’ the ‘my’ of ownership. Even in the nursery a child can be taught to mean by ‘my Teddy-bear’ *not* the old imagined recipient of affection to whom it stands in a special relation (for that is what the Enemy [God] will teach them to mean if we are not careful) but ‘the bear I can pull to pieces

if I like'. And at the other end of the scale, we have taught men to say 'My God' in a sense not really very different from 'My boots,' meaning 'The God on whom I have a claim for my distinguished services and whom I exploit from the pulpit—the God I have done a corner in.' And all the time the joke is that the word 'Mine' in its fully possessive sense cannot be uttered by a human being about anything." C. S. Lewis (in this passage, the fictional demon Screwtape is speaking to another demon about subverting stewardship).

"As Christians, we are stewards of all of life—our bodies, minds, abilities, time personalities, possessions, and the earth. Above all, we are stewards of the gospel. Nothing is left outside the realm of stewardship. We are completely God's, including what we are and what we have. We are not owners; we are *managers* of all God has given us. We are managers accountable to him." Bedru Hussein

"To be entrusted with a role in God's kingdom is to be given the job of a steward. For example, we often say, 'My church.' A more proper perspective would be to say, 'The church I serve.'" Bedru Hussein

"We serve not from pride in who we are or the position we hold or in what we have accomplished. We serve knowing who we are in Christ. Our thankful response is to be good stewards (Philippians 2:3-16)." Bedru Hussein

"Christian stewardship is the practice of systematic and proportionate giving of time, abilities, and material possessions, based upon the conviction that these are trusts from God to be used in his service for the benefit of all mankind in grateful acknowledgment of Christ's redeeming love." United Stewardship Council

"Stewardship is something which must begin with the tasks nearest at hand, in our own house (1 Tim. 5:8). Any participation in the work of the congregation, effective as it may be, which leads to the neglect of our own house and its care, can never be in agreement with the biblical understanding of stewardship." Helge Brattgard

"The biblical point of view looks upon such 'talents' primarily from the point of view of one's relation to his neighbor. The available opportunities should be used in service to others. As a result, 'talents' do not, in the first place, separate one man from other men, but they bind him to others." Helge Brattgard

"Christian stewardship implies...a pattern of life, and attitude toward life, which leaves its mark on the entire congregational life. We are called to become co-workers in this way. That we sometimes in place of this become competitors with one another must be due to the fact that we are poor stewards. God's stewards have no personal positions to maintain. They only have duties to take care of. They have learned how to pray, 'Make us rulers over ourselves that we may become better servants of others.'" Helge Brattgard

"We have been dearly bought. We are admonished: So glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The body must not be ruined or weakened through our own fault. It must rather be kept in the best condition, chiefly because it is one of the 'pounds' which we have been given, and also for the sake of service. Only a disciplined body can contribute effectively to the life of a steward." Helge Brattgard

“The office of ‘fellow-worker with God’ [1 Cor 3:9] would have been no mean honour to have conferred upon the archangel nearest to the everlasting throne.” Charles Bridges

“Growth in Christian stewardship entails moving self-centeredness into God-centeredness, drowning the self in the love of God and immersing the ego in the will of God.” Paul R. Lindholm

“Faithful and informed stewards of the divine master think much of what God has done for them and continues to do for them. They think of the wounds he has healed, of the burdens he has lifted, the countless other blessings he has freely given and the promises of more to come. Thus Christian stewards love and adore their Lord and with joy serve Christ and sacrifice for Christ with heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Paul R. Lindholm

“Out of the worship in the church comes the activities of the church. Service, mission, evangelism, and ethical action spring from the center of worship. The activities of the church in the world are impossible without the stewardship of time, talent, and treasure. This is where the theological becomes the practical and the doctrinal becomes the ethical. Because God has met us in worship we must respond with that stewardship of life that underwrites Christian mission.” Ben Gill

“The Christian is involved in the stewardship of the message of eternal life. No greater stewardship is imaginable than that of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Ben Gill

“The good tidings that God redeems man, the divine self-giving—this is Christian stewardship’s point of reference....The redeemed man has an opportunity for investment which will pay dividends long after the bankers and stockholders have run their course.” Carl. F. H. Henry

“The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because it is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.” John Gardner

“The best of Christians is a poor frail creature. But the least and lowest of believers will find that he is counted among Christ’s servants, and that his labor has not been in vain in the Lord. He will discover to his amazement, that his Master’s eye saw more beauty in his efforts to please Him, than he ever saw himself. He will find that every hour spent in Christ’s service, and every word spoken on Christ’s behalf, has been written in a book of remembrance. Let believers remember these things and take courage—The cross may be heavy now, but the glorious reward shall make amends for all.” J. C. Ryle

“His eye can discern excellence in the least thing which is a fruit of His own Spirit. He can pick out the grains of gold from amidst the dross of your performances, and sift the wheat from amidst the chaff, in all your doings. Your tears are all put into His bottle. Your endeavors to do good to others, however feeble, are written in His book of remembrance. The least cup of cold water given in His name shall not lose its reward. He does not forget your work and labour of love, however little the world may regard it.” J. C. Ryle

“God will reward the child who gave to the missions offering the money she’d saved for a softball mitt. He’ll reward the teenager who kept himself pure despite all the temptations. He’ll reward the man who tenderly cared for his wife with Alzheimer’s, the mother who raised the child with cerebral palsy, the child who rejoiced in his heart despite his handicap. He’ll reward the unskilled person who was faithful and the skilled person who was meek and servant-hearted. He’ll reward the parents who modeled Christ to their children and the children who followed him despite their parents’ bad example. He’ll reward those who suffered while trusting him, and those who helped the ones who were suffering. He doesn’t have to. He wants to! And make no mistake, he will.” Randy Alcorn

“Stewardship isn’t a subcategory of the Christian life. Stewardship is the Christian life.”  
Randy Alcorn

"There is a danger of doing too much as well as doing too little. Life is not for work, but work is for life, and when it is carried to the extent of undermining life or unduly absorbing it, work is not praiseworthy but blameworthy." Ralph Turnbull

“The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for Him. It is easier to serve than to be drunk to the dregs. The one aim of the call of God is the satisfaction of God, not a call to do something for Him. We are not sent to battle for God, but to be used by God in His battlings. Are we being more devoted to service than to Jesus Christ?” Oswald Chambers

“People who cannot find time for recreation are obliged sooner or later to find time for illness.” John Wanamaker

“There can be intemperance in work just as in drink. What feels like zeal may only be fidgets or even the flattering of one’s self-importance. As MacDonald says ‘In holy things may be unholy greed.’ And by doing what ‘one’s station and its duties’ does not demand, one can make oneself less fit for the duties it *does* demand, and so commit some injustice. Just you give Mary a little chance as well as Martha!” C. S. Lewis

“Are you upon earth's heights? No cloud in view?  
Go read your motto once again: ‘This too  
Shall pass away,’ fame, glory, place and power,  
They are but little baubles of the hour,  
Flung by the ruthless years down in the dust.  
Take warning and be worthy of God's trust.”  
Ella Wheeler Wilcox

“Then let the selfish lip be dumb,  
And hushed the breath of sighing;  
Before the joy of peace must come  
The pains of purifying.  
God give us grace  
Each in his place  
To bear his lot,  
And, murmuring not,  
Endure and wait and labor!”  
John Greenleaf Whittier



“We keep killing flowers in the bud because we are no longer capable of letting things grow. And we can no longer let things grow because down underneath we have forgotten how to pray ‘Thy kingdom come,’ and in its place have put our ‘manager’s faith,’ our belief that everything can be produced and organized. We say “God reigns” and still we run about madly keeping the ecclesiastical machinery going.” Helmut Thielicke

“Right now we are in an age of religious complexity. The simplicity which is in Christ is rarely found among us. In its stead are programs, methods, organizations and a world of nervous activities which occupy time and attention but can never satisfy the longing of the heart. The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship, and that servile imitation of the world which marks our promotional methods all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all. When will we come to the point of repentance, throw all the excuses out the window and fall on our faces before God and an open Bible? When will we repent of our sin and allow the Holy Spirit to do whatever the Holy Spirit wants to do?” A. W. Tozer

“A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing.” Hudson Taylor

“To be A, governing huge countries, or B, occupying the smallest place, are the same in reality, for Christ rules events as much with respect to A’s government as he does in B’s little affairs.” Charles Gordon

“I know the vanity of your heart, and that you will feel mortified that your congregation is very small, in comparison with those of your brethren around you; but assure yourself on the word of an old man, that when you come to give an account of them to the Lord Christ, at the judgment seat, you will think you have had enough.” John Brown

“Tom Carson never rose very far in denominational structures, but hundreds of people in the Outaouais and beyond testify how much he loved them. He never wrote a book, but he loved the Book. He was never wealthy or powerful, but he kept growing as a Christian: yesterday’s grace was never enough. He was not a far-sighted visionary, but he looked forward to eternity. He was not a gifted administrator, but there is no text that says, ‘By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you are good administrators.’ His journals have many, many entries bathed in tears of contrition, but his children and grandchildren remember his laughter. Only rarely did he break through his pattern of reserve and speak deeply and intimately with his children, but he modeled Christian virtues to them. He much preferred to avoid controversy than to stir things up, but his own commitments to historic confessionalism were unyielding, and in ethics he was a man of principle. His own ecclesiastical circles were rather small and narrow, but his reading was correspondingly large and expansive. He was not very good at putting people down, except on his prayer lists. When he died, there were no crowds outside the hospital, no editorial comments in the papers, no announcements on television, no mention in Parliament, no attention paid by the nation. In his hospital room there was no one by his bedside. There was only the quiet hiss of oxygen, vainly venting because he had stopped breathing and would never need it again. But on the other side all the trumpets sounded. Dad won entrance to the only throne room that matters, not because he was a good man or a great man—he was, after all, a most ordinary pastor—but because he was a forgiven man. And he heard the voice of him

whom he longed to hear saying, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord.'" D. A. Carson describing his father—a small church pastor

## QUOTES ABOUT SIGNIFICANCE

“In pragmatic America, we are often enamored of and motivated by pragmatism rather than simple obedience to Jesus. We are too often tempted to justify our existence on this planet by doing something ‘significant,’ by ‘making a difference in the world,’ so that we can go to bed at night feeling good about ourselves. But the Christian message is about a God who judges and loves us in our insignificance—that is, when our self-centeredness has sabotaged our ability to make any fundamentally sound contribution to our lives or to others. This God speaks to us the frank word that not only do we not make a difference in the world, day to day we threaten to make the world worse by our sin. But in Jesus Christ, he has judged and forgiven us through the Cross, and now he uses even our insignificant efforts to witness to his coming work in Jesus Christ.” Mark Galli

“...there is in the best Christian lives a power which, within narrow limits and on a small scale, exerts Christ’s authority—the power of His Spirit which, in itself indomitable, bears down all opposition and in the end triumphs over it. This is never more remarkable than when it is seen in obscure unambitious lives, which, while following in the steps of Christ’s sufferings, are at the same time marked by a dignity, a strength, and a victorious purpose that tell of their union with His life in heaven.” H. B. Swete

“The way we respond to life’s circumstances reveals a lot about us. Some look at life and think, “I’m stuck in a dead-end job. I eat the same lunch almost every day. My relationships usually bring me down more than they build me up. And I’m supposed to believe this is good—that this is the gift of God? I don’t see it.” Yet if we are in Christ, then we are assured that God’s perfect plan is unfolding exactly as He intends. And we are taught that we exist for a purpose far greater than “just” driving a bus, being a teacher, or being a parent. An occupation is never meant just to pay the bills. A hobby is never meant just to entertain or pass the time. The content we consume with our eyes and ears is never meant just to distract our minds from life’s stresses. Everything we do is an opportunity to honor God, to become more like His Son, and to point others to Him. It is when we lose sight of this that even the most satisfying moments of life will eventually leave us feeling empty, and the worst times in life will cause us to question His presence or goodness.” Alistair Begg

“To despise yourself, to long to be what you cannot be and so to neglect becoming what you can become, to squander your life instead of nourishing your potential—all these are ways to fail in your responsibility to God.” Nicholas Wolterstorff

“We can’t look to ourselves for a stable identity and sense of self-worth. Our self-confidence, if it is to last, has to come from elsewhere. And Jesus [in the temptation narratives in Matt 4, Mk 1, and Lk 4] shows us where: God’s word. Jesus goes to God’s word rather than lifting himself up by his own power. He’s set the example for us. And the greatest self-confidence we could ever find comes from knowing (1) that we’re *made* in the image of God and (2) that we’re so loved and valued that we’ve been *remade* in the image of Christ.” Pierce Taylor Hibbs

“It’s not self-confidence we’re really after. It’s *Godfidence*. It’s assurance of our worth rooted in the words and actions of God. And the best part is that this is never going to change. It

doesn't rise and fall with our accomplishments. It lives... *a/ways*. We walk through the world beneath it, and we'll flap into the winds of eternity surrounded by it." Pierce Taylor Hibbs

"My battles with self-confidence still run through most days, and I've seen how quickly the seed of yearning for recognition bursts and blossoms into pride and the hope of being respected and remembered. But the flower is a glorified weed. We have to pull it out. Again and again. Because success is like rain: It brings refreshment, but it also saturates the soil of our hearts. And weeds grow wherever there's wetness. Learning to follow Christ is learning to be a gardener of your own heart." Pierce Taylor Hibbs

"This is the heart of liberated and liberating ministry: to know that our ministry and the goal of our ministry are gifts. We do not need to sniff around the secular criterion in order to be assured that our ministries are legitimated. We and the work we have been given to do are already legitimated and justified by the grace of God." Richard John Neuhaus

"When the world strips away your comfort and confidence in things temporal, when friends become enemies and attack you, when in the providence of God suffering enters your life like a flash flood, you are given an opportunity to see very clearly where your ultimate dependence lies and where you find your identity. And its not just something that reveals truth about yourself; it is also something God uses to sanctify you." Joe Thorn

"One must reach the point of 'not caring two straws about his own status' before he can wish wholly for God's Kingdom, not his own, to be established." C. S. Lewis

"In our unspoken but not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another—which springs, I think, from our fear of our own insignificance, a subset of our dread of mortality—we have of late, we Americans, to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement. Like accolades ought to be, the fulfilled life is a consequence, a gratifying byproduct. It's what happens when you're thinking about more important things." David McCullough Jr.

"I am not what I do, but I am what Jesus has done for me. I am a redeemed image bearer, being renewed daily in the image of Christ (Col. 3:10). I am not what has been done to me, but I am free because of what Christ does on my behalf. I am not my relationships, but it is only through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that I can come to the Father (John 14:6). No person, thing, or experience has the power to declare identity. However, we grant them this power when we harbor lies or distorted truths. When we realign ourselves to the truths of what God has said about his redeemed children, we have an identity that is impervious to lies and is crisis proof." Bill Clem

"Our deeds and works should call attention not to our own accomplishments or experiences but to his great work, which alone atones for the sins of the world. Our focus should be not on ourselves—on our strengths or deficiencies—but on the sufficiency of the cross of Christ." Donald Bloesch

"The paradox is that in being servants of Christ we become masters of the world, but in seeking to be masters of the world we become subject to the powers of the world (Mt. 16:24-26; Lk. 9:23-27)." Donald Bloesch

“Half of the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don't mean to do harm. But the harm does not interest them.” T. S. Eliot

“The most intolerable people are provincial celebrities.” Anton Chekhov

“The glory you have always wanted deep down, the compliments you have craved, and the recognition you have desired after every accomplishment are all just misdirected efforts to assuage a God-given ache to be spoken well of by him. We can have that. For those who hold on, who keep faith even through the fire of testing and affliction, who bear the reproach of Jesus and leverage their lives for his mission, an acclaim awaits them that is above all other acclaim. Every time you gladly and faithfully take it on the chin for Jesus, he sees and smiles and stores up acclaim for you. Every time you serve, sacrifice, and press on in the face of painful trails or difficult circumstances and no one applauds you or takes notice, he takes notice and will publicly notice you on that day.” J. R. Vassar

“The world needs glory-hungry men and women—but not insecure glory-hungry men and women who are always fretting over what people think about them; not the glory-hungry men and women who strut in pride and narcissism, promoting and serving themselves; not glory-hungry men and women who exert their energy climbing ladders and spending their time and money accruing clout. We have enough of that in this world. We need men and women who are hungry for the glory that comes from God. This world needs a generation that is satisfied with God's acceptance of them in Jesus; a multitude of people who are happy with and confident in the justifying verdict of God over their lives; men and women who revel in God's unreserved *yes* spoken over them in Christ and who can risk the world's *no*. The world needs men and women who no longer live to please others—an impossible folly—but men and women who live for the Lord's pleasure and are content with his 'very good' ringing in their ears. We need glory-hungry men and women who seek glory for the triune God. We need a groundswell of saints, smitten with the beauty and power of God, who refuse to compete with him for praise.” J. R. Vassar

“In his book When People Are Big and God is Small, Ed Welch points out that the love for the glory that comes from man comes down ultimately to 'needing something from other people.' We need their approval, their love, their affirmation, and their attention to save us from our sense of insignificance and bestow value upon us. Receiving it becomes an idol. When we need others in this way, the result is bondage; our life is lived under the control of other people and their opinions of us. The idol of the glory that comes from man can own us like no other idol. It can tell us how to think, what to feel, how to act, what to wear, and when to laugh.” J. R. Vassar

“There are pastors who derive their confidence from their competence. That is, their ministries 'work,' sometimes spectacularly so, in organizational growth and, so far as it can be measured, in lives changed. Despairing of such proof, ministers are tempted to settle for an authority and legitimation that derives from the approval of peers, or from occasional expressions of gratitude from those who are helped in one way or another. ...In the times when we his ministers feel useless, uncertain, and devoid of authority, we can seek several remedies. We can find dignity in representing to the world two thousand years of a formidably impressive tradition, and that is no little thing. We can find worth in the good

done for clients, even if the community is misguided in its ultimate hope. We can find satisfaction in competencies exercised, even if the voice that we once heard call us to the work now seems to have been an illusion. There are many justifications for ministry in which we can find dignity, worth, and satisfaction, but finally the justification for Christian ministry is derived from him who forbids us to seek our authority from any existent reality short of the reality of his Kingdom come.” Richard John Neuhaus

“Jesus Christ alone is the hope, treasure, joy, and purpose of pastoral ministry. Not church growth, not church planting, not church success, not church business, not church programs, not church activities, not church popularity. Let everything be a means to this end; the treasuring of Christ and the enjoying of his glory.” Jared Wilson

“Grown-up pastors walk with a limp. They have had their feet knocked out from under them at some point and discovered that God is still good all the time. Grown-up pastors have developed healthy habits over time that cultivate godliness in their lives. Grown-up pastors are not impetuous. They are not drawn to this fad and that, or trying to impress you with experiential razzle-dazzle and tomfoolery. Grown-up pastors know that the gospel is the only power to save, and that it is of first importance, so that in their maturity they have grown weary of putting on airs or putting on shows or putting on millstones.” Jared Wilson

## QUOTES ABOUT SUCCESS

“You can generally get success if you do not want victory.” William Ralph Inge

“Even success in the Lord’s work is a broken reed if we lean on it for security.” John w. Sanderson

“...we must remember also, that present success is not *always visible*. Apparent [sic] must not be the measure of the real result. There is often an undercurrent of piety, which cannot be brought to the surface. There may be solid work advancing under ground, without any sensible excitement; as we observe the seed that produces the heaviest grain, lies the longest in the earth. We are not always the best judges of the results of our Ministry.” Charles Bridges

“If there actually is anyone capable of subduing this elusive, invincible, savage monster (I mean popular esteem) and cutting off its many heads, or rather, preventing their growth altogether, he will be able to repulse all these attacks easily and enjoy a quiet haven of rest. But if he has not shaken himself free of it, he involves his soul in an intricate struggle, in unrelieved turmoil, and in the hurly-burly of desperation and every other passion.” John Chrysostom

“And it is a great comfort to know that in a world that lives by success and publicity there are such witnesses, who work quietly and without ambition, who go on preaching as sober men in the midst of an inebriated world. And never grow weary, men who walk with bruised feet on stony ground, looking for crevices in which to cast the good seed. The mere fact that they exist is itself a comfort. They serve a Lord who looks, not for success, but for fruit. Perhaps some guiding word which this preacher uttered years ago lingers in the mind of a single listener in his last hour. With that word he will come before that throne of God, and there it will be recognized as a fruit which no human eye ever saw or even regarded as such. In eternity, however, the diagnoses are different.” Helmut Thielicke

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.” Theodore Roosevelt

“The call to servanthood is a call to worship God by serving others with joy, even when we are not thanked, even if we are mocked, and sometimes even when it seems our service does no actual good. In the absence of recognition, reward, or results, we can be satisfied with what God has done already, what he has promised to do, and whatever he may chose to do in the future.” Nate Palmer

“You know, Lord, how I serve You  
 With great emotional fervor in the limelight.  
 You know how eagerly I speak for You at a women’s club.  
 You know my genuine enthusiasm at a Bible study.  
 But how would I react, I wonder,  
 If You pointed to a basin of water  
 And asked me to wash the calloused feet  
 Of a bent and wrinkled old woman  
 Day after day, month after month,  
 In a room where nobody saw and nobody knew?”  
 Ruth Harms Calkin

“If you define success in terms of your size, your desire for numerical growth will probably outrun your patience with the congregation, and perhaps even your fidelity to biblical methods. Either your ministry among the people will be cut short (i.e., you’ll be fired), or you will resort to methods that draw a crowd without preaching the true Gospel. You will trip over the hurdle of your own ambition. But if you define success in terms of faithfulness, then you are in a position to persevere, because you are released from the demand of immediately observable results, freeing you for faithfulness to the Gospel’s message and methods, leaving numbers to the Lord. It seems ironic at first, but trading in size for faithfulness as the yardstick for success is often the path to legitimate numerical growth. God is happiest to entrust His flock to those shepherds who do things His way. Confidence in the Christian ministry does not come from personal competence, charisma or experience; nor does it come from having the right programs in place, or jumping on the bandwagon of the latest ministry fad. It doesn’t even come from having the ‘right’ graduate degree. The one thing necessary is the power of Christ’s Word. That’s why preaching and prayer will always be paramount—no matter what fad tops the charts. Stake your ministry on the power of the Gospel (Romans 1:16).” Mark Dever

“Statistics may have their uses for churches, but the most important things about a church cannot be measured—the differences between fake and real, between flesh and spirit, between the minds of men and the mind of God. Only as we stand before God on the day of judgment will the real measurement of things be revealed.” Jonathan Leeman

“What would happen if the keynote speaker at the next national conference was the associate pastor of a sixty-person church in rural Nebraska who hasn’t had a visitor in five years? It’s just a hunch, but registrations might lag. One of the most crucial skills for pastors and church lay leaders is to manage church decline when people are leaving because they see, finally, what Jesus is asking of them.” Kent Carlson & Mike Lueken

“Many people today will be less enamored of the outward appearances that were so successful at bringing in the crowds ten years ago. People certainly haven’t abandoned their demand for excellence altogether, but they are recognizing that ‘excellence’ can be a veneer for phoniness. The population that is distrustful of authority and was raised hearing upwards of 850 advertising messages a day is skeptical of glam and spin. Many young worshipers are turned off by over-produced worship music and a speaker who is too polished. Smoothness and precision can come across as insincere. ...A larger church will have to work even harder to ensure that its authenticity shines through its professionalism.



On the other hand, many people will consider a small church's intimacy and ability to respond to the needs of its people as intrinsically genuine." Brandon O'Brien

"I realized I had been proud of the discriminating use I had made of these principles. I thought that God was going to bless the ministry with great numerical growth because I had not bought into wrong methods and was doing things 'right.' *But what I did not realize is that while rejecting wrong methods I had bought into the idea that success meant increased numbers.* To me success in the ministry meant growth in attendance. Ultimate success meant a big, growing church. Certainly there is nothing wrong with the wise use of any of the above principles. They should be part of the intelligent orchestration of ministry. However, when the refrain they play is numerical growth—when the persistent motif is numbers—then the siren song becomes deeply sinister: growth in numbers, growth in giving, growth in staff, growth in programs—numbers, numbers, numbers! *Pragmatism* becomes the conductor. The audience inexorably becomes man rather than God. Subtle self-promotion becomes the driving force. ...We made a covenant to search the Scriptures and learn what God had to say about success. We fiercely determined to evaluate our success from a biblical point of view." Kent Hughes

"Later when we moved to College Church in Wheaton and it began to grow, we were excited to be part of the growth, but actually it meant less to us than some would expect. In our hearts we knew, and we continue to know, that we may never be more successful than we were that Sunday night in our struggling church with twenty-five people. We have come to understand that, as we minister, God our Father sees us and our success in ways we cannot readily see ourselves." Kent Hughes

## WHAT IS CORPORATE PRAYER?

In our culture, people commonly think of big business when they hear the word “corporate.” Terms like “corporate structure,” “corporate raider,” “corporate downsizing,” or “corporate profits” come to mind. We think of corporations like IBM, GM, or MGM. Toss aside that meaning. I am using the word “corporate” in a biblically informed way. The word comes from the Latin term “corpus,” meaning “a body.” The human body has many parts but is a living whole. The body became a metaphor for a group of people functioning as one.

The church is the Christian body of believers (1 Cor 12). The local church is not a business; it is a living body. We transcend mere metaphors here and encounter true mystery. We cannot grasp the full meaning of that corporate reality, but we must use what we can grasp to get a handle on the prayer life of the church.

Some people apply the label “corporate prayer” to any case where believers pray together. For example, they might apply it to the same few folks gathering in a prayer meeting each week from a church of many. Those few folks are members of the body praying together, but how corporate is their prayer experience? Another example is a portion of a church praying in small groups with the same few people in each group. That experience does not give much weight to the adjective “corporate.”

We could just as easily apply the label “corporate” to *any* activity a handful of church members do. At that point, the adjective becomes weightless. We should give the word some heft or let it float off like a helium balloon. When we lack prayer beyond affinity groups, using the term “corporate prayer” serves to camouflage our problem. Why not be real and fully embrace the adjective? Why not make ways to pray well beyond a small group in the local church?

The problem worsens when we move from neglect to rejection. When people refuse to pray beyond their affinity group, we should not apply the wrong label to mask manifest obstinacy. If people will only pray with people they choose, they do not appreciate the reason God chose to make a body of believers. There must at least be the willingness to pray with *anyone* in the body for “corporate prayer” to serve as a meaningful label.

Church members are often enthusiastic about church business meetings as a place of influence, but not enthusiastic about prayer meetings. Do we find that distressing? When we long to express our democratic voice more than talk to our Lord as his people, we have lost our way.

Shouldn't corporate prayer give people exposure to the larger body? Shouldn't we seek to pray in a way that gives rich expression to our corporate identity? Considering how few people have that rich experience, shouldn't we speak more about *corporate prayerlessness* than about corporate prayer?

The label “corporate prayer” reasonably applies to prayer shared by the larger body. Most American evangelical churches lack that experience. We can properly speak of prayer happening in those churches, but speaking about corporate prayer stretches language to the breaking point.

I applaud prayer by individuals, by couples, by families, in small groups, by ministry teams, in staff meetings, in colleges, at special breakfasts, at conferences, on retreats, at rallies, in regional prayer convocations, for national days of prayer, by the pastor from the pulpit, and more. We need more. We need to pray as the body.

My definition of corporate prayer is *prayer gatherings in which anyone from a local church might participate, and in which all kinds of people from that church do participate*. The adjective “corporate” has weight when people assemble for prayer across demographic lines, age, marital status, maturity, talent, economic status, race, passions, temperament, and any other category the world uses to sort people. The adjective is hefty when participation in prayer is not exceptional but standard.

Picture a town square in past centuries. People could meet in small groups in many other places in town, but everyone met in the town square for important purposes. If only the same few people showed up, the town would not have a functioning square. It would have a concept of a square, but not a corporate reality. Similarly, the same few people meeting for prayer indicates a church does not have functional corporate prayer.

For me, corporate prayer is square prayer. Picture a Medieval village whose Lord of the Manor was grand yet also gracious. He calls all the citizens to the town square to talk. Except for a small group, the people ignore the call or refuse to take part. That scenario plays out in churches across America every week. We disregard the most grand and gracious Lord (Col 1:1-22; 2:6-15).

Corporate prayer always happens in a group setting. But group prayer is not always corporate prayer in the full sense of the word. During corporate prayer, over time, you hear the hearts of those who will never be in your home, in your small group, or in your circle of close friends. The one commonality is Jesus. We practice a lot of divvy-up ministry. We need to *un-divvy*. Go beyond praying with your friends, spouse, family, ministry team, age group, or any other legitimate form of clustered prayer. Go back to prayer as practiced by churches before demographics became the rage and ministry silos dotted the landscape. A church that thinks as a body will pray as a body. Form and function unite here because a corpus is a united entity.

What about liturgical prayer? It unites the church in prayer, but it is not enough. The assembly in Acts 1 certainly went beyond liturgical prayer, as did the church when praying under persecution in Acts 4 and Acts 12. The body voiced all kinds of joys and concerns to the Lord.

God made no mistake when he made the body. Pray that way, and prove his wisdom is glorious. Cross into the corpus zone. It is a great place to live and pray.

## QUOTES ABOUT ACTS 2:42 AS AN ABIDING MINISTRY MODEL

*The following quotations (listed in chronological order) show that many believers have recognized Acts 2:42 as a fundamental model for church life. I have not found a single author that says the verse is just descriptive and not prescriptive. The comments are from the third century to the twenty-first century and display remarkable agreement spanning diverse church traditions and ministry callings.*

“From the simple and unemphatic way in which this prayer is mentioned we may gather that that it was regarded as a natural and normal part of the Christian life.” Origen of Alexandria, Treatise on Prayer (SPCK, 1954). Translated by Eric George Jay. Origen wrote this book about 235.

“Wherever these things take place, there certainly the Holy Sprit cannot long be excluded, but rather he will soon arrive with all his goods, mercies and gifts, temporal and eternal. So help us God!” Johann Spangenberg, “Die Apostel Geschichte” In Acts: Reformation Commentary on Scripture, Vol. VI (IVP Academic, 2014), p. 36. Written in 1544.

“Luke is listing the items in which the church engaged. He shows four characteristics by which the true church can be judged. Do we look for the true church of Christ? It is pictured here... In these four things Luke describes the well-ordered state of the church. We must keep to these things if God and the angels are to judge us as the true church and not just boast to be such before men. Clearly, Luke is referring to public prayer. So it is not enough for people just to pray at home by themselves, unless they also meet together to pray, which is in itself a profession of faith.” John Calvin Acts (Crossway, 1995), p.48. Written in 1552.

“These are, indeed, the four essential elements of all true Christian association.” Melancthon W. Jacobus, Notes Critical and Explanatory on the Acts of the Apostles (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1859), p.83.

“Here we have a picture of the infant church in which the idea of a church is realized to a very high degree and which is evidently portrayed here, to point out the essential character of the church.” J.B. Lightfoot, The Acts of the Apostles: A Newly Discovered Commentary (InterVarsity, 2014) pp.90-91. Compiled from handwritten teaching notes Lightfoot produced in the second half of the 1800s.

“Membership in this society meant a continuous effort: it was a *persevering adherence*, both (a) to persons and (b) to duties, especially prayer. Here S. Luke gives us the four essentials that must not be abandoned...” Richard Belward Rackham, The Acts of the Apostles (Methuen, 1901), p.33.

“Here we have a brief description of the religious life of the first Christian congregation. All the essentials are present and are in proper order and harmony. The church has always felt that this is a model.” R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles (Hendrickson, 1934), p.117.

“In the book of Acts (2:42, 46; 20:7) instruction, preaching, prayer and breaking of bread are mentioned, and mentioned in such a way as clearly to show that these elements were, from the beginning, the foundation of all the worship life of the Christian community.” Oscar Cullmann, Early Christian Worship (Westminster, 1978), p.12. Written in 1950.

“The church has drifted far from the simplicity of worship of the Early Church. Did not the Spirit inspire those first disciples to set forth a pattern of worship for all ages?” Herbert Lockyer, All the Prayers of the Bible (Zondervan, 1959), p.230.

“A church can be flourishing, she can be successful in terms of organizations, she can be tremendously active and appear to be prosperous; but if you want to know whether she is a real church or not, examine the amount of prayer that takes place. Prayer is the inevitable conclusion of true doctrine. The first Christians started with the apostle’s teaching, and that led to prayer.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Authentic Christianity (Crossway, 2000), p.162. Written in 1965.

“Though the process for developing maturity in a local church is illustrated throughout the New Testament, Luke’s record of the spiritual and numerical growth of the church in Jerusalem brings all of the necessary ingredients of this process together in one succinct and classic paragraph—Acts 2:42-47.” Gene A. Getz, The Measure of a Church (Regal, 1973), p. 145.

“Every Christian today should study these verses until his heart is saturated with their content. Look at it. What a happy, working, praying, sharing, unified congregation! In describing the conduct and ministry of the new converts the Holy Spirit shows us the pattern of what our churches should be.” George A. Hern, The Book of Acts: A Practical Exposition (Daniels, 1974), p. 45.

“No doubt Luke intends us to recognize that verses 42-47 describe what happens to people in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. Here is the ideal, to which the later church must always look for an exemplar.” Anthony Lee Ash, The Acts of the Apostles: Part 1 (Sweet, 1979), p.57

“Here are the four essential elements in the religious practice of the Christian Church.” I. Howard Marshall, The Acts of the Apostles (Eerdmans, 1980), p.83.

“According to Luke, ‘They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer’ (Acts 2:42). In these activities the Christ-centered content of Christian worship is clear.” Robert Webber, Worship Old and New (Zondervan, 1982), p.37.

“What, then, does the example of the Jerusalem Christians mean to us? *Continuous prayer means consistent praying with other Christians*. There is no question that God intended the Jerusalem Christians to be a model for believers of all times.” Gene Getz, Praying for One Another: The Rewarding Experience of Praying with Others (Victor, 1983), p.33.

“Four basic characteristics must be present in the church in every age. ‘And they devoted themselves’ marks the perennial issue of every Christian community.” Gerhard A. Krodel, Acts (Augsburg, 1986), p.92.

“How can you identify a real church? Notice the four marks of identification.” J. Vernon McGee, Acts: Chapters 1-14 (Nelson, 1991), p.40.

“Acts 2:42 delineates the basic ingredients of church life: ‘They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread (Communion) and to prayer.’ They had all the ingredients they needed to have a functioning, God-blessed, Spirit-directed church. Today, churches often use gimmicks and entertainment to entice people to come to their services. Such tactics are a sign that those churches aren’t following the biblical pattern and depending on the Spirit’s leading.” John MacArthur, The Master’s Plan for the Church (Moody, 1991), p.87.

“We find in these practices of the early church – devoted to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer – the four essential elements in the religious practice of the Christian church...We see here the essential ingredients of the way in which the new community sustained their life of discipleship.” Michael J. Wilkins, Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship (Zondervan, 1992), pp.277-278.

“We will get a good idea of what the local church is meant to be by looking back at the first Christians in Jerusalem. Acts 2:42-47 describes those believers.... The early church described in that passage was successful in every area. It was vibrant, pleasing to God, and growing by leaps and bounds. Therefore, we can learn a lot from it. Also, because it embodied the principles taught throughout the New Testament that apply to all churches in all times, we know that our church bodies today can become like it in emphases and philosophy.” Wayne Mack & David Swavely, Life in the Father’s House: A Member’s Guide to the Local Church (P&R, 1996), p.33.

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“These verses tell what developed in the church and how it functioned in those remarkable days after Pentecost. Obviously this description is intended as an example for us and our assemblies.” James Montgomery Boice, Acts: An Expository Commentary (Baker, 1997), p.55.

“At various times in Acts, especially in the early chapters, Luke gives summary reports of how the church is doing. Here we have the first. In it our author describes what a biblical church really looks like, not only in the first century, but in every century from the Lord’s ascension until his second coming.” Kenneth Gangel, Acts: Holman New Testament Commentary (Holman, 1998), p. 31.

“This passage gives us a picture of early Christian community life. Each of the things the new Christians practiced are given often in the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament

letters, as essential aspects of Christian living... Many strategists within the church are asking for paradigm shifts in our organizational life. But the paradigms they recommend are primarily those found in the business world. We should rather be searching the Scriptures with an open mind, uncluttered by preconceived notions, to see whether we have lost some of its teachings on community life. The Scriptures are usually used today not to derive truth but to reinforce or illustrate truth derived from secular management studies.” Ajith Fernando, Acts: The NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 1998), pp.125, 131.

“The interrelation between these four criteria, and particularly between the first two (defined in modern ecumenical usage as ‘faith and order’; 6:2-4), would dominate all subsequent efforts to understand the unity of the church and the divisions within Christendom, as well as the efforts to obey the imperative of Christ’s prayer ‘that they may all be one’ (John 17:21).” Jaroslav Pelikan, Acts (Brazos, 2005), p.60.

“The final paragraph of Acts 2 depicts the initial organization of those who responded to Peter’s invitation and joined the 120 (vv. 42-27). Verse 42 is regularly cited as the earliest description of four central elements in Christian worship, which should characterize the church as it gathers in any time and place: preaching or teaching God’s word, fellowship, the Lord’s Supper (Communion or the Eucharist), and prayer.” Craig L. Blomberg, From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation (B&H, 2006), p.28.

“With Acts 2:42-47 ending as it does, Luke wants to leave no doubt that there is an important connection between community life and the ‘favor’ the community experienced with outsiders. This kind of engagement has a positive effect on mission...The biblical picture is not of what someone receives from the church, although one does receive a great deal, but of what one gives and how one contributes to it. The portrait of the early church in Acts shows that community and the welfare of the group were a priority. This attitude reflected spiritual maturity that allowed the church to grow.” Darrell L. Bock, Acts (Baker, 2007), p.155.

“‘Worship’ and ‘service’ were not separate realms. Apostolic instruction produced unity of purpose and will, expressed both in prayer (cf. 4:24-31) and in the communal meal, made possible by the generosity aroused by unity.” Richard J. Pervo, Acts: A Commentary (Fortress, 2009), p.93.

Are you the mother or father of young children, trying to structure your life in a way that makes the most of your days, looking to grow spiritually but unsure of how to do it? Listen to the Word preached in fellowship with other believers and reflect on it; make it a priority to be there when your church celebrates the Lord’s Supper; and be consistent in prayer – not just on your own, but with other believers.” Kate Treick, “Simple Grace, Simple Growth,” Modern Reformation (March/April 2009), p.25.

“As our children learn to join that body in *the prayers*, corporate worship becomes meaningful. I tend to pray for the same things over and over again and these requests sound a lot like those of other Christians in my same age-group and demographic profile. Throw in some prayers from older and younger saints, from people who are richer and poorer, black, Latino, Asian, and European, and now my prayers become part of the prayers of the church. Once again, my narrow horizon of self-enclosed existence is opened up to a cross-centered and cross-cultural communion. The use of the definite article (*‘the prayers’*)

underscores this point.” Michael Horton, The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World (Baker, 2009), p.208.

“The combined working of these four factors produces the very fabric and structure in which the priesthood of all believers is called to function. Acts 2:42 presents the irreducible minimum of what constitutes the operation of a New Testament church.” Sam Thorpe Jr, No Other Foundation: An Exposition of Acts 2:42 (ECS Ministries, 2010), p.54.

“The primary worship passage in Acts is 2:42-47, and in verse 42 Luke provides the ‘four pillars’ of the earliest worship – teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. It says the believers ‘devoted themselves’ to these things, a critical concept in Acts (1:14; 2:42, 46; 6:4; 8:13; 10:7) that stresses both unity in pursuit of a goal and serious persistence in attaining these things.” Grant Osborne, “Moving Forward on Our Knees: Corporate Prayer in the New Testament”, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (June, 2010), p.254.

“Worship is the only proper response to a sovereign God who is personally involved in our lives, and prayer is the primary means by which we respond in worship. In both Judaism and the early church, corporate prayer was at the heart of their services. Thus it is sad that in the average church today so little prayer is uttered in the service, and so little time is given over to corporate prayer in church life. The two foci of biblical worship are Scripture and prayer, and both aspects are increasingly neglected in the popular church movement. There is a completely valid hunger for revival in the church today, but it will not come until the church gets on its knees.” Grant Osborne, “Moving Forward on Our Knees: Corporate Prayer in the New Testament,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (June, 2010), p.267.

“Both Acts 2:42 and 1 Corinthians 1:9 use the term [*koinonia*] as a title for the *local church*. In other words, while coffeehouses are places where you can *find* community, church *is* community. The joining of individual lives, unified by a common experience of salvation, by the life of the Holy Spirit, and by a shared sense of mission, is so essential to his design of the local church that God simply refers to the church by this common Greek word, *koinonia* – ‘*the community*.’ It’s almost as if God is telling us that all other relationships, partnerships, and communal affiliations are shadows of the real thing, the church – the place where God provides the means to change us from restless wanderers to give us true community with his people.” Jim Samra, The Gift of Church: How God Designed the Local Church to Meet Our Needs as Christians (Zondervan, 2010), p. 63.

“In all these activities of teaching, fellowship and sharing, breaking of bread, and praying we see a well-rounded picture of the church, the marks of authentic embodiment of the Spirit in the community’s life, a canon for the measurement of the church’s activity today. As one views modern congregations, many with their hectic round of activities—yoga, ceramics, basketweaving, daycare—one suspects that socialization is being substituted for the gospel, warm-hearted busyness is being offered in lieu of Spirit-empowered community. One wonders if the church needs to reflect again that when all is said and done ‘one thing is needful’ (Luke 10:42), namely to embody, in the church’s unique way, the peculiarity of the call to devote ourselves ‘to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers’ (2:42).” William Willimon, Acts: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Knox, 2010), p.41.



“The Great Commission consists of both the ingathering *and* the perfecting of the saints. But how is the Great Commission to be executed? The book of Acts gives us an answer to this question...In Acts 2:42, we read that the early disciples ‘devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching,’ and also shared a common life together (Acts 2:46). Luke comments that ‘the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved’ (2:47).” Guy Prentiss Waters, How Jesus Runs the Church (P&R, 2011), p.17.

“With the early church still in infancy, and the first converts being either Jews or proselytes (Acts 2:11) to the Jewish faith, they still attended temple for prayer services (Acts 3:1). But prayer was more than just part of the services they attended; it was part of their community life (Acts 2:42). Prayer is part of what it means to love God as a worshiper. We learn to communicate with him in prayer. Praying in community is also part of a shared worship experience.” Bill Clem, Disciple: Getting Your Identity from Jesus (Crossway, 2011), p.127.

“Many of these features can be ‘mapped’ as features of the believers in the remainder of Acts...but the one which can be underemphasized is that the response portrayed is *corporate* rather than individual. All of the activities described in 2:42-47 are activities of a *community*, and the verbs are consistently plurals.” Steve Walton, “A Spirituality of Acts?” in Reading Acts Today: Essays in Honor of Loveday C. A. Alexander (Bloomsbury, 2011), p.195.

“Throughout the book of Acts, the growth of the church—its mission—is identified by the phrase, ‘And the word of God spread.’ The regular gathering of the saints for ‘the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship,’ ‘the breaking of bread,’ and ‘the prayers’ (Ac 2:42) is not treated in Acts merely as an exercise in spiritual togetherness but as itself the sign that the kingdom had arrived in the Spirit. Furthermore, it issued in a community that brought wonder and awe to its neighbors. Being built up into Christ, the members of this community realized a communion with each other that crossed the lines established by this present age. Richly fed with Christ and his gifts, they shared their gifts—spiritual and temporal—with each other and with outsiders, so that the Word of Christ continued to reverberate in ever-expanding rings from pulpit, font, and table to pew and then out into office buildings, homes, and restaurants as believers lived out their existence in the world.” Michael Horton, The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way (Zondervan, 2011), p.899.

“Though praying together is not elevated above the devotion to the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, and the breaking of bread, it is accorded the same level of importance as the other three foundational commitments new believers make.” Andy Chambers, Exemplary Life: A Theology of Church Life in Acts (B&H, 2012), p.70.

“Public, corporate worship and prayer was a key ingredient in both the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost and the first New Testament missions movement.” Dennis Fuqua, United and Ignited: Encountering God through Dynamic Corporate Prayer (L/P, 2012), p.39.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to sharing things in common, breaking bread together, and praying. The spiritual bonding and forming came in the group, during the group activities they shared in common. But the question to be asked of all of us is: have we *wholeheartedly* devoted ourselves when we gather together as the body of

Christ? Or do we come to worship tired, distracted, twittering and tweeting and texting, but not really spiritually bonding with others and with God?” Ben Witherington III, A Shared Christian Life (Abingdon Press, 2012), p.13.

“Don’t read too quickly past the word ‘devoted’ in Acts 2:42. The word meaning has much intensity and deliberation. It is like a wild and hungry beast ready to devour its prey. When the early Jerusalem church members devoted themselves to prayer, they were doing a lot more than reading names off a list. They were fervent, intense and passionate about prayer. They had no doubt that God was listening and responding. A failure to prayer was tantamount to a failure to breathe...Prayer was the lifeblood of the early church.” Thom S. Rainer Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive (B&H, 2014), pp.66-67.

“When we gather to emphasize the spiritual over the physical, the corporate over the individual, we unite our people around God’s purposes for his church. Corporate prayer builds concern for our corporate unity, and our corporate witness. The church corporately praying marked many of the great movements in the book of Acts. It defined their life at Pentecost (2:42). It equipped the believers with the Spirit to speak the Word of God boldly (4:31).” Brad Wheeler, “4 Reasons You Should Add a Regular Prayer Service to Your Church Calendar”, <https://www.9marks.org/article/4-reasons-you-should-add-a-regular-prayer-service-to-your-church-calendar/>, June 21, 2016.

“In our other activities, we can be tempted to think success depends on us. If we host enough youth retreats, sing our hymns heartily enough, or cut enough of our neighbor’s grass, then our church will surely grow. If we invite enough people, train enough people, mobilize enough people, then we’ll surely see results in our community. These things may be good. But coming together to pray reminds us the flourishing of Christ’s church does not depend ultimately on us. In prayer, we humbly extend what Thomas Manton called ‘the empty hand of the soul...[which] looketh for all from God.’ We take as our example the members of the early church who ‘devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers’ (Acts 2:42). They prayed together when they ate (Acts 2:46), and when they were fasting (Acts 13:2-3). They prayed together when they were threatened with persecution (Acts 4:23-31), and when they were appointing new elders (Acts 14:23). They prayed together in formal temple worship services (Acts 3:1), and at riverside prayer meetings (Acts 16:13, 16). Those first Christians faced an enormous workload: gospel-proclaiming, disciple-making, church-planting, and widow-feeding. By prioritizing prayer together, they admitted their ultimate weakness and found their unfailing help in God.” Megan Hill, “Praying Together: An Invisible, Yet Vital Work” <https://www.9marks.org/article/praying-together-an-invisible-yet-vital-work/> June 21, 2016.

“I can think of no better – or simpler – discipleship program than for more mature and less mature believers to sit diligently under the preaching of the Word and then to pray together. I can also think of nothing more exciting. This was how you first learned the faith, this was how the members of the early church grew (Acts 2:42), this was how Christ is even now conforming to himself the saints in Korea and the saints in my own church, and it is how those around you will come to maturity too. Brothers and sisters, are you ready?” Megan Hill, Praying Together: The Priority and Privilege of Prayer in Our Homes, Communities, and Churches (Crossway, 2016), p.80.

These activities were, and of course still are in our present time, ‘means of grace’ – that is, means whereby the life of Christ could grow and manifest through their lifestyle and attitudes.” Maurice Barratt, Fellowship: Life in the Early Church - Studies on the Four Basics According to Acts 2:42 (Amazon Digital, 2017), Kindle location 79 of 717.

This summary is one of the few places where Luke tells us what happens after people are converted, and it emphasizes key elements of the church’s life.” David E. Garland, Acts (Baker, 2017), p.33.

## THE CHURCH AND PURPOSE

### THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

The Bible shows that the church exists to glorify God through heartfelt worship. Worship will be our eternal occupation, so it must serve as our fundamental purpose in this life. We creatures are obligated to worship our creator. Saved people find a fervent desire to meet that holy obligation fueled by a growing grasp of gospel grace.

Worship is more than holding a church service; it is honoring God in all we do. Worship is a posture of humility before God. The basic Hebrew and Greek words for worship carry the meanings: to bow down, to kiss (people would bow to kiss the feet of a superior), and to serve. Worship means to humble yourself before the living God because he deserves it. Worship is valuing God as God. Delighting in the supremacy of God is the most uplifting thing we can do. If you have not done that, you have *not* worshiped, even if you *were* in a worship service. If you have done that, you *have* worshiped, even if you *were not* in a worship service. The church worships by living all of life in the light of the gospel of Christ.

### THE PURPOSES OF MINISTRY

We can define three overarching ministry purposes in light of the main purpose of the church. Three phrases can give direction to all ministry.

#### WE MUST MAKE MORE WORSHIPERS

The phrase “we must make more worshipers” reminds us that evangelism is a prime ministry purpose. The only way to make more worshipers is through the ministry of the gospel. The goal of that ministry is the glory of God. Evangelism is more than mere human altruism; it is divine service.

#### WE MUST MAKE MORE MATURE WORSHIPERS

The phrase “we must make more mature worshipers” reminds us that converts need to move on to spiritual maturity so that our appreciation for God deepens. A great God deserves great reverence and love from those he has saved. Our lives bring him more glory as we grow in grace and holiness. A local church must be a vital fellowship in which the entire body builds itself up in the faith.

#### WE MUST MAKE SURE GOD DOES THE WORK (THROUGH US) AND GETS ALL THE GLORY

The phrase “we must make sure God does the work (through us) and gets all the glory” reminds us that true ministry is beyond our capabilities. We must remain dependent on, and faithful to, God in all we do. It also brings us back to the goal of worship—the glory of God.

## THE BEGINNING AND THE END OF CHURCH MINISTRY

God is the true beginning and end of church ministry. He sets the terms and his glory is the goal. Concern for human beings is proper and commendable but we must remember that God matters most. Below I have traced some of the differences between people-centered and God-centered ministry.

**People:** The prime goal is to offer services that help people

**God:** The prime goal is service that glorifies God

**People:** We shape the ministry according to what people seek (non-churched or churched)

**God:** We shape the ministry according to what God seeks as revealed in the Bible

**People:** We talk a lot about God but do not talk much to God

**God:** We talk a lot about God and talk a lot to God

**People:** We use parts of the Bible to help people

**God:** We help people embrace the whole Bible

**People:** We take teachings from the Bible

**God:** We convey the tone and tenor of the whole Bible

**People:** We spotlight demographics and trends

**God:** We spotlight the gospel and historic orthodoxy

**People:** Leaders read mostly new ministry best-sellers

**God:** Leaders read mostly ministry classics from the centuries

**People:** We see evangelism as reaching people

**God:** We see evangelism as making worshipers

**People:** We emphasize statistics and quantity

**God:** We emphasize stewardship and quality

**People:** The leadership seeks to keep everyone happy

**God:** The leadership serves to make everyone holy

**People:** The leadership is like a windsock

**God:** The leadership is like a compass

**People:** We change our plans and programs so no one will leave

**God:** We hold to sound philosophy so everyone will grow

**People:** We see long-term members as owners of "our church"

**God:** We see God as the owner of every church

**People:** We run programs apart from the big picture

**God:** We evaluate programs by the big picture

**People:** We pursue short-term gain

**God:** We produce fruit that lasts

**People:** We try to achieve a balance of power among church members

**God:** We live by the Spirit's power working in all members

**People:** We chose leaders to represent groups in the church

**God:** We chose leaders to shepherd the whole flock

**People:** People desire power

**God:** People respect biblical authority

**People:** Full congregational buy-in is crucial

**God:** Making wise decisions is crucial

**People:** We serve as long as people appreciate us

**God:** We serve because we appreciate the Lord Jesus

**People:** We want to look good and to feel good

**God:** We want to be good and to do good (Titus 3)

**People:** We want good reviews from people

**God:** We want a good letter (Rev 1-3) from Jesus

*“And when God is so often spoken of as the last as well as the first and the end as well as the beginning, what is meant (or at least implied) is, that as he is the first efficient cause and fountain from whence all things originate; so he is the last final cause for which they are made; the final term to which they all tend in their ultimate issue.”*

*Jonathan Edwards*

## BOOKS FOR PASTORS AND OTHER CHRISTIAN WORKERS

*“The things I want to know are in books; my best friend is  
the man who’ll get me a book I ain’t read.”  
Abraham Lincoln*

Why bother? That is the question. Why did I bother making this collection of books for you? Why should you bother with any of my reading recommendations?

I read little before my conversion (in high school) and when I did read I plodded along. When I got into pastoral ministry the Lord gave me the ability to move from impulse power to warp speed with good retention. That surprise gift became a matter of stewardship. I read a lot, in part, to help others (especially leaders) who cannot sift through as much material as quickly and to point them to good resources. That is why I bothered with this document.

Why should you bother with my recommendations? *Not* to take on a marathon. This document is *not* a reading assignment! It *is* a menu of options for you to consider for your needs. If this menu seems too large (no New Jersey diner patron would have that thought) realize that it covers five decades of reading. I was highly selective. Imagine all the books I did not include!

This is a personal digest of books that have most helped me serve the Lord’s church. Sometimes they have done that when coming from outside the evangelical tradition in which I serve. The books are arranged by a small set of topics (I again restrained myself by leaving out commentaries, reference books, language helps, and more.) but they cover a wide range of interests, length, reading levels, and doctrinal maturity. There is something here for everyone in church ministry, from newbies to veterans.

The versions listed are the ones on my bookshelves—many come in various editions and revisions. I do not necessarily recommend every book each author has written, nor do I endorse every word of the books included here. Test everything by God’s inerrant Scriptures.

If you only read one book from the following lists, I suggest you choose [The Pastor’s Justification: Applying the Work of Christ in Your Life and Ministry](#), by Jared Wilson. It is under the heading: “Books about Significance, Stewardship, and Success.” I wish I had the book in 1983. I urge you to read it even if you do not serve as a pastor.

Enough of my introductory blather! Are you inclined to bother? If so, proceed.

## THE PURPOSE AND PRACTICE OF THE CHURCH

Worship: The Ultimate Priority, by John MacArthur (Moody, 1993). An accessible book about worship as the Bible defines it. Since worship is the eternal occupation of the church, it is the reason for our existence and the purpose of our ministry.

Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship, by David Peterson (Eerdmans, 1992). An excellent survey of what true worship means in the Bible and how it must shape the whole life of the church.

Servanthood as Worship: The Privilege of Life in a Local Church, by Nate Palmer (Cruciform Press, 2010). A brief book that puts the purpose of life in a clear biblical perspective and tells why it is essential to be committed to a sound local church.

Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ is Essential, by Collin Hansen & Jonathan Leeman (Crossway, 2021). This approachable book covers not only the basics but also why virtual church (which grew during the Covid pandemic and is now urged by some as an abiding model) is not enough.

To the One Who Conquers: 50 Daily Meditations on the Seven Letters of Revelation 2-3, by Sam Storms (Crossway, 2008). Leaders should prioritize the way Jesus assesses churches rather than run right to consultants. This book draws attention to the Lord's evaluation of seven churches.

The Invading Gospel: A Distinguished Poet Describes His Journey from Isolated Self-Involvement to the Joy of Christian Fellowship, by Jack Clemo (Fleming Revell, 1958). A powerful declaration of how the gospel confronts sinners and converts them. I resonate with Clemo having gone from long-term aversion to the gospel to conversion by it.

Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions, by John Piper (Baker, 1993). Piper roots healthy missionary ministry in worship as the church's purpose.

Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship, by Michael J. Wilkins (Zondervan, 1992). This book cleared away a lot of clutter in my mind about what discipleship means.

God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy Love of God Reorients Our World, by David F. Wells (Crossway, 2014). This fine book distills decades of reflections by an outstanding scholar with a God-centered approach and a heart for the church and the lost.

The Prodigal Church: A Gentle Manifesto Against the Status Quo, by Jared Wilson (Crossway, 2015). Wilson does a humble but penetrating job of questioning common operating assumptions and points in a biblically healthy direction.

Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community, by Brett McCracken (Crossway, 2017). A much-needed correction for an evangelical culture driven by marketing models.



Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive, by Thom Rainer (B&H, 2014). An experienced church consultant reveals a dozen common traits of dying churches and points to healthy practices.

The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love, by Jonathan Leeman (Crossway, 2010). This outstanding book roots healthy church membership and church discipline in God's holy love.

What is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission, by Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert (Crossway, 2011). A stimulating look at a well-meaning but misdirected approach to church ministry.

The Sky is Red, by Geoffrey T. Bull (Moody, 1965). Remarkably powerful reflections on the church by one who switched from communism to service as a missionary for Christ.

### **DOCTRINE AND DEVOTED SERVICE**

Bible Study: A Students Guide, by Jon Neilson (P&R, 2013). The best thing you can do is *not* read books on my list but learn to study the Bible properly, in context, to get the point God makes. Neilson's book will help you do that.

Exegetical Fallacies, by D. A. Carson (Baker, 1996). If, while teaching or preaching, you tell your hearers, "the original text says," or "word study indicates," or "the aorist tense means," this book will steer you away from common interpretive mistakes.

What is the Gospel?, by Greg Gilbert (Crossway, 2010). We must be clear on the core message of Scripture and this small book does a great job explaining the gospel.

The God Who Is There: Finding Yourself in God's Story, by D. A. Carson (Baker Books, 2010). This book places our lives in the God-centered view of history.

A Theology of the New Testament, by George Eldon Ladd (Eerdmans, 1974). Ladd sharpened my understanding of God's kingdom in this age and beyond.

Institutes of the Christian Religion, by John Calvin (Westminster, 1960). I always learn valuable lessons from the great Reformer's landmark work.

Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, by Wayne Grudem (Zondervan, 1994). I like how Grudem links theology to the life of the church and ends each section with devotional readings, questions, and a hymn. His more compact version, Bible Doctrine: Essential Teaching of the Christian Faith, does the same but omits the hymns.

A Little Exercise for Young Theologians, by Helmut Thielicke (Eerdmans, 1962). One of my graduate school professors made us all read this little book because he knew pride from knowledge was a constant danger.

A History of Christian Thought, by Justo Gonzales (Abingdon, 1970). Available in one-volume and three-volume editions, this focuses on the historical elaboration of doctrine. He does the best job I have seen putting the church's discussion on the Trinity and the deity of Christ in context.

Mere Christianity, by C. S. Lewis (Macmillan, 1952). Originally broadcast on radio to the British public, these talks convey Christian basics. Especially helpful on the Trinity and "right and wrong as a clue to the meaning of the universe."

The Ascended Christ: A Study in Earliest Christian Teaching, by Henry Barclay Swete (MacMillan, 1910). The doctrine of the ascension and session of Christ was almost absent in my church experience. This book brings the doctrine forward and applies it to church life.

What's Your Worldview?: An Interactive Approach to Life's Big Questions, by James N. Anderson (Crossway, 2014). Creatively cast as a choose-your-own-adventure story, this book helps us discover our worldview and how it shapes life.

The Supremacy of God in Preaching, by John Piper (Baker, 1990). One of the best books about God-centered preaching.

Your God is Too Small, by J. B. Philips (Macmillan, 1961). A classic call to see and serve the living God rather than cling to the shrunken versions we create.

The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity, by Donald McCullough (NavPress, 1995). This is one of the best explorations of how people make idols today, even if they never touch wood or stone.

God the Holy Father, by P. T. Forsyth (Independent Press, 1957). The first article in this collection of essays helped me see the centrality of God's holiness and how it gives us confidence in God's love.

Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Pauline Theme, by Stephen Westerholm (Eerdmans, 2013). In recent decades, some scholars have argued that the Apostle Paul was not focused on human guilt and divine rescue when he taught about justification. This book shows why that claim is not good scholarship.

This Changes Everything: How the Gospel Transforms the Teen Years, by Jaquelle Crowe (Crossway, 2017). A young writer provides a remarkably mature look at the gospel-driven life. I wish the word "teen" was not in the title because any age can benefit from this brief gem.

The Pursuit of God, by A. W. Tozer (Christian Publications, 1982). My favorite of Tozer's writings.

Personal Revival, by Stanley Voke (O.M. Literature, n.d.). This book on brokenness and grace was recommended to me by a friend who endured a hard time in ministry. It is short but full of encouragement.

Power Encounters: Reclaiming Spiritual Warfare, by David Powlison (Baker, 1995). A non-sensational, sober, and positive presentation of spiritual warfare in Scripture.

The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas a Kempis, (Moody, 1958). That Moody Press would publish the work of a Medieval monk shows how far-reaching this devotional classic has become.

The Pursuit of Holiness, by Jerry Bridges (NavPress, 1978). The author shows us how holiness is both a pure gift of grace and a pursuit of those living under grace.

Champagne for the Soul: Rediscovering God's Gift of Joy, by Mike Mason (Regent, 2006). This book is the product of a 90-day experiment in joy by a man who is "not happy by nature." I asked an elder team to read this during a trying time of ministry.

Holy Sonnets of the Twentieth Century, by D. A. Carson (Baker 1994). It amazes me that a person who writes great scholarly prose expresses devotion so well in one of the hardest poetic forms. This is beautiful, God-entranced art.

## PRAYER

The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions, edited by Arthur Bennett (Banner of Truth, 1975). A wonderful collection of old gold that never loses luster.

Developing a Healthy Prayer Life: 31 Devotions for Communing with God, by James Beeke and Joel Beeke (Reformation Heritage, 2010). These 2-to-3-page devotionals can enrich anyone's personal prayer practice.

Preacher and Prayer, by E. M. Bounds (Kessinger Rare Reprints, n.d.). This book was published in 1907 but changed my life a century later.

How Do Preaching and Corporate Prayer Go Together?, by Ryan McGraw (Reformation Heritage, 2014). I wish everyone would read this little 26-page pamphlet. Following its lead would produce big changes for the better.

Praying for One Another: The Rewarding Experience of Praying with Others, by Gene Getz (Victor, 1983). It is worth searching for this out-of-print book about corporate prayer.

The Potential and Power of Prayer: How to Unleash the Praying Church, by Chuck Lawless (Tyndale, 2022). An honest, biblical, and practical book encouraging the church body to pray together.

Only a Prayer Meeting: Studies on Prayer Meetings and Prayer Meeting Addresses, by Charles Spurgeon (Christian Focus, 2000). A renowned preacher's potent comments about praying together were collected from various years of his ministry. A true gift.

Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church, by John Onwuchekwa (Crossway, 2018). This is a brief but helpful handbook on corporate prayer.

Praying Together: The Priority and Privilege of Prayer in our Homes, Communities, and Churches, by Megan Hill (Crossway, 2016). A fine book on the principles and practice of prayer.

The Revival in Ireland: Letters from Ministers and Medical Men in Ulster on the Revival of Religion in the North of Ireland Addressed to the Rev. H. Grattan Guinness, by Henry Grattan Guinness (Martien, 1860). This collection of letters shows how prayer is both the prod and the product of true revival.

Praying with Paul: A Call for Spiritual Reformation, by D. A. Carson (Baker, 2015). Paul's prayers for churches serve as a template for our priorities.

Intercessory Prayer: A Ministerial Task, by Eugene Bradford (Simpson Publishing, 1991). This pamphlet helps us to perform a neglected duty and privilege.

Quiet Talks on Prayer, by S. D. Gordon (Fleming Revell, 1939). A heartwarming and thought-provoking book.

He Sent Leanness: A Book of Prayers for the Natural Man, by David Head (Macmillan, 1959). This is the only tongue-in-cheek prayer book I have seen. He turns our less-than-noble attitudes into a unique liturgy of exposure. The humor prods us in a better direction.

### **SIGNIFICANCE, STEWARDSHIP, AND SUCCESS**

The Pastor's Justification: Applying the Work of Christ in Your Life and Ministry, by Jared Wilson (Crossway, 2013). This outstanding book helps anyone involved in church life and ministry. It roots our significance in the gospel, not in achievements. If only this book existed when I started in pastoral ministry.

Finding Hope in Hard Things: A Positive Take on Suffering, by Pierce Taylor Hibbs (Pierce Taylor Hibbs, 2020). Not only is this a great book on suffering, but it deals with the key issues of loss, anxiety, and self-doubt. It is especially good at linking these issues to our identity and success. It is both beautiful (almost poetic) and theological—a rare combination.

Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome, by Kent and Barbara Hughes (Crossway, 1987). This book is a powerful testimony to the danger of a flawed concept of success and the freedom that comes from adopting a biblical understanding.

Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carlson, by D. A. Carson (Crossway, 2008). This renowned scholar deeply respected his father who faithfully labored as a small church pastor. A very touching story and a call to humble service.

Freedom for Ministry, by Richard John Neuhaus (Eerdmans, 1979). It is not an easy read, it is quirky, and it comes from outside my church tradition, but this is the most stimulating book on pastoring I have read. He roots our calling in the eternal kingdom, encouraging us to be good ambassadors of a presently disputed sovereignty. A great antidote to pride.

The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, Effective, by Brandon J. O'Brien (Bethany, 2010). While not against large churches, the author encourages small churches to be good stewards of the advantages they have and to understand true success at any size.

People Pleasing Pastors: Avoiding the Pitfalls of Approval-Motivated Leadership, by Charles Stone (IVP, 2014). This book deals with a fundamental problem that often undermines ministry by pastors and lay leaders.

When People are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man, by Edward T. Welch (P&R, 1997). Charts a God-centered path to needing people's affirmation less and loving people more as a result.

Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry, by Paul David Tripp (Crossway, 2012). A bracing survey of unhealthy actions and attitudes of a congregation and its leaders. It also points the way to true success.

Glory Hunger: God, the Gospel, and Our Quest for Something More, by J. R. Vassar (Crossway, 2015). A great tool to help us all fight self-absorption and to channel service in a truly satisfying direction.

Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving, by Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie (IVP, 2013). Numerous pastors gave input to this five-year research project. The report (full of personal stories as well as data) covers marriage, family, self-care, emotional intelligence, group dynamics, and more.

How to Succeed as CEO of Your Life: 12 Spiritual Principles I Wish I Had Learned Long Ago, by Paul Brownback (Foundation Stone, 2019). Paul, my mentor for over 20 years, deepened my understanding of how good stewardship is a framework for all endeavors.

Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women under Pressure, by Langdon Gilkey (Harper One, 1966). If you are looking for a fascinating World War II account that shows original sin in action and displays the difference between clawing for significance and doing humble service, this is it.

## LEADERSHIP

Shepherding the Church: Effective Spiritual Leadership in a Changing Culture, by Joseph Stowell (Moody, 1997). This book had a big impact on me when I first read it and I have gone back to it repeatedly.

The Christian Ministry: With an Inquiry into the Causes of its Inefficiency, by Charles Bridges (Banner of Truth, 1991). First published in 1830, this classic has stood the test of time. Full of fortifying truth.

Note to Self: The Discipline of Preaching to Yourself, by Joe Thorn (Crossway, 2011). Contains 48 readings (usually two short pages) about applying the gospel personally to a wide range of concerns.

All Creatures Great and Small, by James Herriot (St. Martins, 1972). A book about rural veterinarian practice might seem odd for this list, but Herriot's positive and patient interaction with people challenged me as a shepherd of souls. You can benefit from his example and have fun reading some great stories.

Good Christians, Good Husbands?, by Doreen Moore (Christian Focus, 2019). A unique and practical look at what we can learn from the marriages of John Wesley, George Whitfield, and Jonathan Edwards. Fairly compact but full of great lessons.

The Conviction to Lead: 25 Leadership Principles for Leadership that Matters, by Albert Mohler (Bethany House, 2012). Nicely arranged into 25 short sections, this is one of the most important leadership books I have read.

No Other Foundation: An Exposition of Acts 2:42, by Sam Thorpe Jr (ECS Ministries, 2010). The author points to a crucial passage often neglected in church leadership books. Luke's summary statement in Acts 2:42 is a prime tool for shaping and assessing ministry today.

Reveal: Where Are You?, by Greg Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, and Eric Arnson (Willow Creek Resources, 2007). An internal spiritual audit of Willow Creek Church commissioned by the leadership revealed that the famed seeker-driven church was not making disciples well and pointed to markers of real spiritual progress.

Reforming Pastoral Ministry: Challenges for Postmodern Times, edited by John Armstrong (Crossway, 2001). This collection of 14 essays by various authors has especially helpful chapters on courageous leadership, church growth, and prayer.

Campaigning with Grant, by Horace Porter (Konecky & Konecky, 1992). A personal aid to Ulysses S. Grant shows us good leadership in action. A colorful record of humility, focus, decisiveness, and courage.

Harvard Business Review on the Mind of a Leader, (Harvard Business School, 2005). A collection of eight articles that focus on character rather than technique. The material is more transferable to ministry contexts than most business publications.

The Courageous Follower: Standing Up to and for Our Leaders, by Ira Chaleff (Berrett-Kohler, 1995). A business book about good "stewardship" by both leaders and followers. There are too few books about followership.

Get Rid of the Performance Review! How Companies Can Stop Intimidating, Start Managing—and Focus on What Really Matters, by Samuel Culbert with Lawrence Rout (Business Plus, 2010). This book exposes why traditional business performance reviews (often done with staff in churches) are a bad idea and shows a better option.

Common Sense for Board Members: 40 Essays about Board Service, by Edgar Stoesz (Good Books, 2000). Each of the thought-provoking essays is less than two pages long.

Meetings that Work: A Guide to Effective Elder's Meetings, by Alexander Strauch (Lewis and Roth, 2001). This small book helps leaders make good use of time and opportunity.

The Unity Factor: Developing a Healthy Church Leadership Team, by Larry Osborne (Owl's Nest, 2001). Explores the importance of team unity (not uniformity) in church leadership.

On Writing Well, by William Zinsser (Collins, 2006). This is a fine book on how to write any kind of non-fiction.

Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer, by Roy Peter Clark (Little Brown, 2016). The author devoted just a few pages to each tool but he delivers a lot of help in each one. Good for all types of writing.

Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace, by Joseph Williams & Gregory Colomb (Longman, 2012). This book provides many examples of poor writing and revises them as it unpacks the basics.

## **ENGAGING CULTURE**

Is that a Fish in your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything, by David Bellos (Faber & Faber, 2011). This academic but approachable study shows the magnitude of the work of translating written texts. It is not a book about the Bible but is about translating any text. Some (not all) of his comments about the Bible are ignorant but the book is both helpful and entertaining for those seeking insight into the challenge of going from original to receptor languages.

Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture, by Lesslie Newbigin (Eerdmans, 1986). This book by a missionary to India showed me the need to study our own culture just as we would a foreign culture in which we sought to serve.

Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, by Neil Postman (Penguin Books, 1985). A classic work that explains the significance and drawbacks of living in an image-oriented rather than word-oriented culture. He displays a great sense of humor even while making sobering points.

A God of Many Understandings: The Gospel and a Theology of Religions, by Todd Miles (B&H, 2010). This book helps us approach other faiths in a way that honors Christ as the only way of salvation, is intellectually satisfying, and is compassionate.

Eschatological Discipleship: Leading Christians to Understand Their Historical and Cultural Context, by Trevon Wax (B&H, 2018). Wax provides a stimulating presentation of biblical discipleship and rival worldviews like consumerism.

The Other Worldview: Exposing Christianity's Greatest Threat, by Peter Jones (Kirkdale, 2013). This is a great book about the two basic models for understanding our world. I wish every parent would read this with their high school-age children.

Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution, by Carl F. Trueman (Crossway, 2022). A great book about the root ideas shaping our culture. Pair this with the previous book to gain a great understanding of the culture coming hard at our youth.

When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Movement, by Ryan T. Anderson (Encounter, 2018). This is the best material I have seen on this issue. Anderson is kind, scholarly, approachable, and frank.

The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth, by John Schneider (Eerdmans, 2002). The author takes us beyond simplistic thinking about money and possessions. This book is a good counterpoint to evangelical writings that tend to demonize capitalism and lean toward socialism.

The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity, by Andreas Kostenberger & Michael Kruger (Crossway, 2010). A scholarly critique of liberal theologians who misrepresent the history of Christianity. This book covers the canon of scripture, text transmission, and the true roots of Christianity.

Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture, by J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, & Daniel B. Wallace (Kregel, 2006). This book deals in a scholarly but readable way with subjects like tradition, manuscripts, the canon, the deity of Jesus, and mythical religion.

Truth Matters: Confident Faith in a Confusing World, by Andreas Kostenberger, Darrell Bock, & Josh Chatraw (B&H Books, 2014). The authors use the work of Professor Bart Ehrman as a case study because his attacks on the Christian faith are widely published.

It's Dangerous to Believe: Religious Freedom and Its Enemies, by Mary Eberstadt (Harper Collins, 2016). This is a sobering yet encouraging call to action.

Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions, by Gregory Koukl (Zondervan, 2009). Provides solid coaching on how to interact with people using sound thinking and showing a gracious manner.

Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion, by Os Guinness (IVP, 2015). This guide comes from 40-plus years of talking with people who oppose the Christian worldview. He helps us ask questions, engage common assumptions, and speak with grace and truth.

Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies, by David Bentley Hart (Yale University Press, 2009). This book is not easy but is worth tackling. It addresses many myths about Christianity taught in academic settings. His wit and words are too sharp at times, but his historical survey and critique are impressive.

The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, by Thomas S. Kuhn (University of Chicago, 1970). A theology professor made me read this classic philosophy of science book to understand how paradigms (thought frameworks) function. After the tough slog through it, and much to



my surprise, I was glad because it made me see how humans form scientific frameworks and think about how we form them in theology and ministry.

Bible in Pocket, Gun in Hand: The Story of Frontier Religion, by Ross Phares (University of Nebraska, 1964). A scholarly and hilarious look at religious life in the early American West. With so many heavy books in this section, I had to include this one which provides many laughs.

*“When you find a leader, you have found a reader...We simply cannot lead without a constant flow of intellectual activity in our minds, and there is no substitute for reading when it comes to producing this flow”*

*Albert Mohler*

*“He is inspired, and yet he wants books! He has been preaching at least for thirty years, and yet he wants books! He had seen the Lord, and yet he wants books! He had had a wider experience than most men, and yet he wants books! He had been caught up into the third heaven, and had heard things which it was unlawful for a man to utter, yet he wants books! He had written the major part of the New Testament, and yet he wants books! The apostle says to Timothy and so he says to every preacher, “Give thyself unto reading.” The man who never reads will never be read; he who never quotes will never be quoted. He who will not use the thoughts of other men's brains, proves that he has no brains of his own. Brethren, what is true of ministers is true of all our people. You need to read. Renounce as much as you will all light literature, but study as much as possible sound theological works, especially the Puritanic writers, and expositions of the Bible. We are quite persuaded that the very best way for you to be spending your leisure, is to be either reading or praying. You may get much instruction from books which afterwards you may use as a true weapon in your Lord and Master's service. Paul cries, ‘Bring the books’—join in the cry.”*

*Charles Spurgeon (reflecting on 1Timothy 4:13)*

## BOOKS BY HOWARD LAWLER

Available in paperback or Kindle versions through Amazon.

***The Corporate Prayer Challenge: 30 Days to Kickstart the Change We Need (Salpizo, 2020).*** Up for a challenge? Take a pass on thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail and pick up this book. The journey will take less time but reaches eternity. *The Corporate Prayer Challenge* is a 30-day reading adventure focused on prayer by the gathered church. Pastor Lawler roots his arguments in careful examination of the Bible. He also confesses ministry mistakes, calls for repentance, and uses dashes of humor to help the medicine go down. The book combines careful analysis and practical advice. The author is not a miracle worker and does not promise mature corporate prayer in just one month. He does invite you to take a few minutes a day to kickstart an ongoing prayer journey. The destination is greater health, joy, and ministry effectiveness—all to the glory of God. Come along!

***Talking Social Justice: Stories and Questions for Worried, Woke, and Wistful Evangelicals (Salpizo, 2020).*** Politicians and pundits often say that we “need to have a conversation about” social justice. We need *better* conversations that do more than skim the surface with slogans and simplistic notions. This book provides Bible-based help. It spotlights passages people neglect or pluck from context. American history lessons and the author’s urban childhood stories play supporting roles. The readings only take about five minutes each but the questions which follow promote reflection and discussion. Do not stay on the surface of scripture and social justice—go deeper.

***A Trail Guide for Church Ministry: A Proverbial Journey (Salpizo, 2021).*** This book invites you on a thru-hike of gospel fundamentals led by a seasoned pastor. The author’s proverbs serve as stepping-off points in each section and summarize lessons learned in decades of church ministry. Pitfalls are noted and progress promoted, primarily through meditation on God’s inspired Scripture. Pastor Lawler also points to truth gleaned from many wise authors, past and present. Come survey the glorious gospel landscape, gain a God-centered perspective, and serve our ultimate purpose!

***Christmas and the Real World: Scenes of Hardship, Grace, and Peace (Salpizo, 2022).*** It’s the most wonderful time of the year! Holiday specials and elevator music say so every December. Many people agree but others groan. Some get angry because hardship has overwhelmed the holiday. Rev. Howard Lawler has shepherded many people through adversities and has faced his own—even at Christmastime. *Christmas and the Real World* displays scenes of hardship from the nativity passages as settings for God’s truth and grace. December is the most wonderful time of the year...for some. Jesus came for all.

To contact the author, go to [Salpizo.com](http://Salpizo.com)