THE CHURCH AND ITS MINISTRY

A brief theology of the church with a view to equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

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INTRODUCTION

Christian ministry and a theology of the church belong to and need each other. When separated, both are undermined. Ministry in the church of Jesus Christ is enriched by a robust theology of the church because the central activities of Christian ministry have always taken place in the context of a particular group of persons who gather in Christ's name. Christian ministry is an integral aspect of what the church is, and what it is was instituted by its Lord and Savior to accomplish. The nature of the church, which comes first, informs the nature of the church's ministry. In that way, Christian ministry serves the church, the Body of Christ, not vice versa.

Christian ministry exists for the sake of the Body of Christ in the name of its Head, Jesus. Ministry is a means to God's great purposes for his people and, as we will see in this essay, Christian ministry, in one way or another, involves not just pastors and elders or other "leaders," but all members of the church gathered in congregations for worship and service.

GCI's journey of renewal

It has seemed good and right that as a denomination of the Christian church, GCI should give concentrated time and effort to filling out its theological understanding of the church (ecclesiology). Over the last 20 years or so we have not given ecclesiology as much attention, study and teaching as other doctrines of the Christian faith. We have spent more effort understanding and learning how to communicate the core doctrines of the faith.

The doctrinal renewal that has transformed (and continues to transform) GCI from top to bottom, focused initially on the most fundamental or central truths of biblical revelation regarding who God is as revealed in Jesus Christ according to Scripture. The Spirit focused our hearts and minds on the person and work of Jesus who reveals the true nature, character, heart, mind and purpose of God. In Jesus, God made himself known in person, in time and space, in flesh and blood. As a denomination, GCI was arrested, then re-centered by that self-revelation of God, which focused our faith, hope, love and worship of God through him.

As we were renewed around this "Center of the center," Jesus Christ, by the Word and Spirit, we were directed to take account of the grace of God in the new covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Legal and contractual understandings of our relationship with God were left behind and we discovered life in Christ under his freely given grace, and with that a life of peace, joy and love in a relationship with God that had been more or less obscured under our former teachings. We discovered that God was entirely for us and with us in Jesus because God is a good and gracious God from beginning to end. Our own renewal was itself an unforgettable sign of God's grace, since we had not earned or deserved his renewing, regenerating grace.

Inseparably connected to God revealed in Jesus Christ, and living in the grace of the covenant fulfilled in him, we came to see and to be captured by the biblical revelation that God is not a lonely God, but from all eternity the Triune God of holy fellowship, communion and love. In coming to see and believe in Jesus as the one who reveals and reconciles us to God, we came to comprehend that this Jesus identified himself as one with the Father and one with the Holy Spirit. He takes us to the Father and he sends us his Holy Spirit. Through Jesus, we came to recognize the divinity of the Son and the Spirit. The

one whole Triune God is our Savior. The oneness of God's being was a unity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So Jesus directs us to make disciples and baptize in the one (singular) name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:16-20).

Consequently, it makes sense why the writers of the New Testament assume the identity of all three of the divine persons as being Lord and God. As a result, the first creeds of the one church of Jesus Christ that summarized the teachings of the apostles were all Trinitarian in structure as was its worship and teaching. As a denomination, renewed by the Spirit, we came to see that is why the early church was moved under the Word and Spirit to develop a more formal doctrine of the Trinity to address confusion and mixed messages arising in the church to make explicit what was already implicit in the apostolic biblical revelation and in the faith statements and practices of the New Testament and early church (see our article on the Nicene Creed).

Reformed theology gives birth to reformed ministry

The renewing work of God by his Word and Spirit among us can be described (and is best described) in theological terms. We became Christ-centered, grace-filled and Trinitarian. Ever since, we have been learning more about these realities and how to communicate them to others. We continue to live within God's renewing work, learning how to more faithfully participate with God's ongoing ministry to share that renewing work with others.

So now, out of a desire to live in the saving grace of our Triune God as revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit and according to Scripture, we want to take time to consider how we best share in Christ's ministry as his church. We want to grow in learning how to most faithfully be witnesses to the renewing grace of God of which we have been the beneficiaries so that others may join in and share in the gift of our renewal. We want to pass on to others what we have received in and through the congregations and ministries of our denomination. In order to move in that direction, it seems good and right to explore as best we can what it means to be the church (our ecclesiology), and how we might share in Christ's ministry as a church (our missiology). We turn now to that task in the rest of this series by first exploring the theology of the church.

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 1

THE THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

The New Testament has much to say about the nature of the church, the assembly of those called together, and about the ministry that took place in those first years of its life. We have examples and teaching in the New Testament about both. The book of Acts is indispensable for examples of the functioning of the church with some explicit teaching also included. However, it is the apostle Paul who offers significant and relatively extensive teaching related to the nature, purpose and functioning of the members of the body of Christ. The book of Ephesians is especially important. Paul not only talked about the church, but referenced his own ministry and its relationship to Jesus Christ in the context of the church, the Body of Christ. He also commented on the ministries of others and how his was related to theirs, whether in alignment or opposition. Appointed by the resurrected Jesus Christ, Paul serves as an example and source of information about the church and Christian ministry.

A theology of the church for the sake of ministry will take account of the New Testament revelation—not to create a blueprint for reduplicating the New Testament church (which is impossible), but to assimilate what we learn there and synthesize it to see what kind of core understanding we can make use of to inform and shape our being members of the Body of Christ and participating in Christ's continuing ministry on behalf of the Father and by the Holy Spirit. Our understanding and practice of ministry must be firmly rooted in our understanding and participation in the church, the Body of Christ.

Jesus Christ, his church and his ministry

If God's revelation and redemptive work culminates, as we have come to believe, in Jesus Christ who is God's only self-revelation and self-giving, we would assume that any answer to our questions about the church and its ministry must be founded in Jesus Christ, God's own answer and revelation of who he is and what he has done, is doing, and will do for us and our salvation. This is how the biblical revelation approaches any description of the church and its ministry. As we discover in biblical revelation who Jesus is in relationship to the Father and Spirit, and who he is in relationship to us, we discover that the church is identified by its relationship to Christ. The church belongs to Jesus Christ. It is his church. It is his ministry that takes place in the church and overflows from it. The most important thing about the church is recognizing whose church it is. All else about it flows from that.

Our questions and God's revelation in Jesus Christ

As we seek to minister in Christ's name in his church, we come with many questions about ministry. It will be unlikely that all of our questions will be directly answered. We may discover that some of them are not relevant or actually are the wrong questions (or at least the wrong place to begin looking for answers). But we can ask: Are we given the basics? The fundamentals? The foundations? Are we provided sufficient information to strengthen and encourage us and give us direction? Set priorities? Arrange and organize ourselves, to cooperate, communicate, coordinate? And is any insight provided to do all this in a wide range of differing socio-cultural and, within these, even differing local contexts?

Down through the ages the church has looked to the revelation God has graciously given to provide what is central, what is foundational, what is essential for his people to faithfully participate in what the Father has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit in this "evil age"—the time

between the times, in history, in the world. We too, along with the assistance of those who have gone before us, can do no less.

What questions are answered by the biblical revelation centered around Jesus Christ? The most fundamental answer given to us is unmistakable—the center or core of the being and identity of the church is clear biblically, theologically and ontologically (that is, in reality, in essence, in actuality). In turn, this answers our questions about the core of Christian ministry by those who belong to the church of Jesus Christ. Biblical revelation addresses the questions of: What constitutes the church? What is the nature of the church? What is it for? How does it live out its life? What directs the church in its calling or vocation, mission or purpose? Who is involved and in what way? We discover that the nature, purpose and design of the church aligns perfectly with the core of our faith and worship of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit.

Once we answer the question *Who is Jesus Christ?* and see who he is, it becomes clear what the church is and what its purpose is, for the church has its being and vocation on the basis of *who* it belongs to. We understand and participate in the church by knowing who it belongs to. If we know whose it is, we know where it comes from, what sustains it, what directs it, what it is for, and where it is headed. Simply put: *the Church is the Church of Jesus Christ*. Since we know that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of the Father in fellowship and communion with the Holy Spirit, then as his church, the church belongs to the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. *Through Christ, the church belongs to the whole Triune God.*

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 2

IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

In this part of the essay we'll look at four primary ways the church is identified in biblical revelation: body of Christ, cornerstone and foundation, groom and bride, and sharing-sacrament in body and blood.

1. Body of Christ

The church (*ekklesia* in Greek, meaning those called or assembled together) is most often and with greatest weight and stress identified as the *Body of Christ* (Romans 7:4; 1 Corinthians 6:15; 10:16; 12:12; 12:22; 12:23; 12:27; Ephesians 1:23; 2:19; 3:6; 4:12; 4:25; 5:30; Colossians 1:24; 1 Timothy 6:2; Galatians 1:2).

By way of analogy to the human body with its head, this image tells us that there could be no closer created relationship than that between Jesus Christ and those who belong to him. The connection is vital—it is essential to its life. The body belongs to and has existence and direction by the head to which it is entirely joined. The body is the body of the head. You identify the body by the head to which it essentially belongs. The body does not exist or live apart from the head.

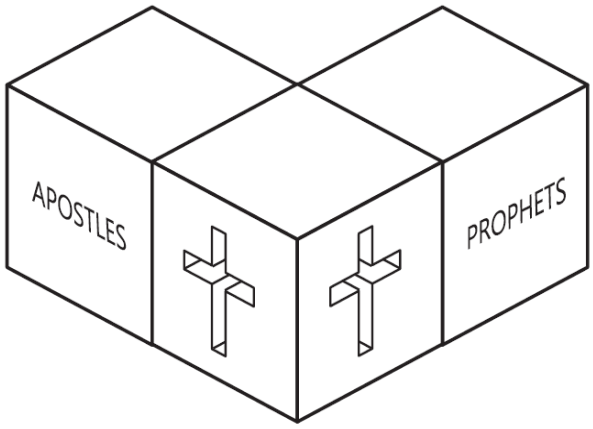
Though closely joined, the Head is not to be confused or interchanged with the Body. The Head is the source, the life, the sustenance, the authority of the Body. The Body depends upon the Head while the Head does not depend upon the Body.

> Note: The strict analogy with a human body breaks down since the created human head cannot live long apart from its body. As is true in every case, you cannot work backwards from the logic of a creaturely analogy to doctrinal statements about God, who is not a creature. Knowing Jesus is Lord and the eternal Son of God, blocks the misuse of this image to make it seem there is a kind of mutual dependence of the Head upon the Body. The teaching and image used is meant to tell us far more about the Body than about the Head.

The church belongs to Jesus in a way that exceeds the connection of human heads to human bodies. As the Body of Jesus Christ, the church belongs indivisibly to him. It has no existence, no life apart from him. Further implications of this connection between Christ and his Body are laid out in the New Testament. We'll explore those later.

2. Cornerstone and foundation

The second image Paul offers is less organic but still pithy, pointed and in certain ways, a more comprehensive description of the relationship between Christ and his church/his Body. Making use of an analogy from the engineering of a physical temple, Paul identifies Jesus as the *cornerstone* of a temple of worship built in his honor. In using this analogy, Paul was drawing on an ancient practice, giving it a unique meaning that is defined by Jesus, not by the myths and temples of pagans.

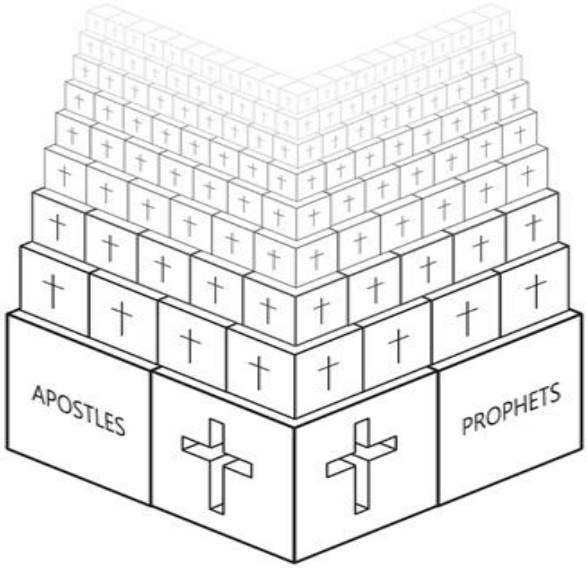


"Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph.2:20).

The image of a cornerstone conveys the idea of the absolute beginning of a structure. Laying the cornerstone is the first step in construction, especially in building a temple. It provides the building's meaning, its structural form and integrity. Physically, the cornerstone gave alignment to the structure's length, width and height. All other elements of the temple were set in reference to this stone, thus finding their proper meaning and place in reference to it.

In pagan temples the cornerstone often had an inscription declaring which god the temple was dedicated to—that is, whose temple it was. In ancient myths, known in the days of the early church, the image of a cornerstone was sometimes used metaphorically to refer to the beginning point of all of creation set up by the gods. By referring to Christ as the cornerstone of the church, Paul is emphasizing these points:

1. That the very existence of the church is dependent upon him.
2. That the church and its worship belong to him, are dedicated to him.
3. That all that the church is and does must be arranged, ordered and structured in reference to him as the source, norm and standard of its life.



"In [Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:21).

Peter makes use of the same image, wanting to make sure his readers don't get the wrong idea and think of Christ in impersonal, inert ways as a literal cornerstone might suggest. So he qualifies his use of the image:

> As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 2:4-5)

Peter wants to make sure we see the resurrected Jesus Christ, who is eternally alive, as the cornerstone. Jesus is active, speaking, communicating and nourishing those joined to him as members of his body, as those who worship God in and through him. We, alive in Christ, are living stones built on him to offer our lives daily as an act of worship to God. Jesus is thus a life-giving cornerstone, not a dead block of marble. He is the Living Word of God to us.

The center of the center

To compare this to another image we often use, a cornerstone is to a building what the center point of a circle is to the circle's circumference. It's another way of saying Jesus is the Center of the center. Jesus being the center of the church means that he is the key to its whole meaning, structure and functioning. Everything else orbits around him and is oriented to him so that all its movements in all its parts are related to and measured and guided by staying centered on who he is and on his purposes for his church called together by him and gathered around him.

Cornerstone with a foundation of the apostles and prophets, the written Word of God

Paul brings in another element here before he talks about the church as a whole. He tells us that what is first oriented and already made to be in alignment with the cornerstone are certain foundation stones. The cornerstone first provides a reference to other foundation stones upon which the rest of the church is built. Together with the foundation stones, the cornerstone provides a foundation for the whole building. As the image is laid out by Paul, those foundation stones that are first directed and oriented to Jesus, the cornerstone, are the prophets and the apostles.

The prophets were persons appointed by God before Jesus Christ was incarnate to bear spoken and written testimony to God and prepare the people of God to ultimately identify and properly respond in faith to the incarnate Son. The apostles were persons appointed by God during and after Jesus' earthly ministry to point back to Jesus Christ incarnate and his completed work of salvation and point forward to his return and the consummation of his rule and reign, his coming kingdom.

Together, the writings of the prophets and apostles are what we call Scripture—the Old Testament and the New Testament. These persons and their messages, ordered and directed by Jesus Christ, the Living Word, point to him, providing, with him as the cornerstone, the complete foundation for anything and everything built upon it as his church.

So the foundation of the church is Scripture in service to Jesus Christ himself the eternal Word of God, who authorized both the prophets and apostles to be normative witnesses to him. We can summarize this by saying that the written Word of God serves as the revelation of God that is appointed to direct and order the life and worship of the church to Jesus Christ, who is the Living Word of God.

None of this revelation with Christ at the Center would be possible without the ministry of the Holy Spirit both before and after the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. The gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential if those apostles and prophets were to hear and faithfully receive the Word of God. And we would not be able to hear or faithfully receive from Scripture were it not for the gracious work of the Holy Spirit made possible by the completed work of Jesus Christ. So God's normative communication to us is an achievement of the whole Trinity, each person serving together with a distinct aspect of gracious ministry to us that we might know the Triune God and be reconciled to him so that we live in fellowship and communion with God.

The written Word of God is authorized by and gains its authority from the cornerstone, the Living Word of God. The Living Word of God is the living source of the written Word of God. As the Living Cornerstone, Jesus Christ himself continues even now to serve as its interpretive center. The written Word is to be interpreted in a way that points to Jesus Christ as its normative and living Center. The Living Word himself is the continuing source of the written Word.

The Living Word continues to speak to us normatively or authoritatively in and through his written Word. The Living Word is not to be thought of as standing at a deistic distance from the written Word, as if the risen Lord Jesus had become mute. The Triune God remains the speaking, communicating and eloquent God who speaks in and through his written Word. And we hear it best when we listen to it with Jesus Christ as its living, speaking Cornerstone, as if it is his Word, as if that written Word belongs to him.

Here are some key passages that contribute to this insight:

> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)
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> As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 2:4-5)
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> When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. (John 15:26)
>
> Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. (Acts 1:16)
>
> The Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5:37-40)
>
> [Jesus] said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself…. He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." (Luke 24:25-27; 44-45)

3. Groom with bride

The third image that supplements our understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the church, his body, is one of groom with bride. This image points out a very personal, deep, life-long, intimate and fruitful relationship. Here are a few key scriptures that use this image:

> The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. (John 3:29)
>
> Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. (Rev. 19:7)
>
> The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. (Rev. 22:17)
>
> After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:29-32)

This image indicates a very close, even intimate and personal relationship of Jesus with his church. It also conveys a dynamic, interactive, interpersonal element of relationship. Given other such relational imagery throughout the New Testament, it conveys the idea of a history of relationship that develops and grows, especially from being unmarried, to being betrothed to having the marriage consummated.

In the Old Testament there is preparation for this dimension of understanding with God's relationship with Israel being compared to the relationship of a husband and wife. This is poignantly portrayed in Hosea where Israel's unbelief and betrayal are compared to adultery. There are also several references in Isaiah and Jeremiah to the people of God as God's bride (Isaiah 49:18; 61:10; 62:5; Jeremiah 2:2; 2:32; 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11; Joel 2:16).

Again, this image should not be taken alone. It helps us fill out a portrait when put together with the other images. This image, along with the others, are all together illustrative of a deep and complex reality that can't be reduced to any one word or image. The images synthesize other more literal teaching about God's relating to his people and what we are told about the history of that relationship culminating in the metaphorical image of the marriage feast of the Lamb depicted in Revelation 19:7-9.

4. Sharing-sacrament in body and blood

A fourth image used in several passages and alluded to in yet others, involves the idea of being related to Jesus Christ by way of the image of *ingestion*. Our fellowship and communion with Christ is like our taking him into our bodies as our food, as sustenance for our life. We display this image when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. As we take bread and wine, we are said to be taking and eating his body broken for us, and his blood poured out for us.

This image conveys the idea of not only ingestion, but also, as interpreted by Jesus, of his giving up his life for us and establishing a renewed covenant relationship with him---the new covenant in his blood. So we can refer to this image as being *sacramental,* partaking of his body and blood. We are receiving a share in his resurrected and ascended life in renewed relationship with God. That's how closely Christ is related to us and how dependent we are on him, more than even physical food.

Communion in his body and blood by way of the sign of ingestion points to a very close connection that provides sustenance (nourishment). This image suggests other New Testament images of life-giving relationship, including those between the vine and branches, and the flow of water giving life to persons, plants and animals in a parched land.

Recall also how Jesus identifies himself as the Bread of Life and Living Water. The taking of another into our bodies conveys the idea of indwelling, or internalizing him. Such deep connection in the New Testament is often related to the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit within us, working in our hearts, minds and spirits, and upon our human nature.

Here are two references to those images:

> Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. (John 6:53-56)

> Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation [*koinonia*=partaking, sharing, having communion] in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation [*koinonia*] in the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:16)

What do we learn from these images?

In their own way, each one of these four images points to the reality of a deep relationship between Christ and his church (a relationship that involves worshiping the Father and receiving the Spirit). Many other passages speak in more literal ways concerning this relationship, using words such as *follow, receive, serve, obey, learn, hope, love, trust, faith,* and *belief*.

Though these words are important and quite helpful, the spiritual depth, meaning and wholeness of the relationship we enjoy with Christ are perhaps best captured and synthesized by the images we've just explored. In Part 3 of this essay, we'll look further at the implications.

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 3

GOD'S "GATHERED TOGETHER" AND "CALLED OUT" ONES

In Part 2 of this essay we looked at four New Testament images that define and describe the church. From these we derived this important lesson: *The church is the church by being in vital, living and dynamic relationship with Christ, its Lord and Savior*. In and through that relationship everything the church is and does aligns with Jesus, its living center and cornerstone, set squarely on the foundation of Holy Scripture with Christ being the Bible's source and interpretive key. Proclaiming and reminding the church of its relationship with Jesus is the first and foremost responsibility of ministries that truly belong to their Lord. The church's primary task is to stay "centered on the Center"— to "keep the main thing the main thing." Connected, aligned and centered in this way, the church lives out a communion and coordination with Jesus in a way that displays that it, with all its members, belongs solely to its Lord.

The *ekklesia* of God

With that reminder, let's now begin looking at more literal and discursive or conceptual teachings concerning the church, beginning here with the meaning of the word "church," which translates the Greek word *ekklesia* (sometimes translated "assembly"). *Ekklesia* is used about 111 times in the Greek New Testament, including twice in Matthew, where in Matthew 16:18 Jesus speaks of "building" his church. In the context of ancient Israel and the New Testament, the word of the Lord goes out, calling people to assemble before him to hear his word. The people who gather are God's own assembly—his people. Responding to God's call, they are called *away* or *out from* their previous ultimate loyalties and connections, and God forms them into a people gathered to worship him alone.

The Lord God with his Word and Spirit has always intended to gather "a people for his name" (Acts 15:14). That is how ancient Israel came into being. God chose and spoke to certain persons, beginning with Abraham, and formed them into his people. The Lord God did this as an act of mercy and grace—calling *nobodies* and making them *somebodies*. They did nothing to deserve this calling—God chose them, spoke to them, and formed them into his people in order to demonstrate his freely-given mercy and grace. Thus ancient Israel was the assembly (the "church") of the covenant of promise, called into being by the Word of the Lord.

Called together by and for proclamation

As an assembly, the church is *called together.* That calling comes via a proclamation—a word of announcement that addresses, invites and directs a people to assemble. As people respond, they collect around the one who has called them together by his Word. Jesus, God's Word to humanity, speaks to us and calls us to assemble around him under his direction, to be built together upon him, the Living Word, with his written Word.

The church is *sent out* as representatives of Jesus the Living Word, to proclaim what the New Testament calls the "good news" or "gospel" (*euangelion* in Greek). The gospel identifies in words who Jesus Christ is, and announces the in-breaking and coming rule and reign of his kingdom. At the time of Jesus, "good news" could refer to the message delivered by a messenger after a battle between two kings. A herald would bring back to their town the "good news" that their king had won the victory, thereby letting them know that they would not be taken captive by the defeated king. In the context of the New

Testament, this good news is the proclamation that originates with Jesus. It's the message about who he is, and what he has done to bring us reconciliation with God and to give us a share in his victory over sin, death and evil.

Called to Jesus

Jesus is both the victorious king and the herald who proclaims the good news regarding the in-breaking of the reconciliation, rule and reign of God through him. His announcement reveals the appropriate *response* to him and to his establishment of the coming kingdom of God. It calls his people to believe (trust in) who he is and what he is doing, and to repent of (turn away from) all other loyalties to and ultimate trust in anyone or anything else. Consider this passage:

> Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:14-18 ESV)

Note here the dynamics. Jesus, the Living Word, addresses Simon and Andrew, calling them to gather around him and to follow him daily. They are to stay with him, be in his presence and learn from him. But more than that, he promises to make them *become* far more than what they could ever imagine. As they gather to him, he declares that he will form and transform them. In relationship to him, they will *become* far more than they were—far more than the circumstances into which they were born—far more than what *nature* or *society* could make or mold them into. Jesus opens a door for them to come in under his rule and reign, and thus live as citizens in his kingdom. In response, they leave everything behind (their *nets* represent their way of life up to that point). It was the Word himself addressing them in person that set them free to respond to him, to freely join themselves to him, repenting of everything else—the good and the bad. With this calling of Jesus, his church began to assemble.

Gathered, sent, transformed

Gathered to him by his call, these first disciples were transformed as they followed him in his ways and trusted in his word regarding the proximity of the kingdom of God. But even more than that, they began to *participate with Jesus* in his ingathering to himself of those who would begin living under his rule and reign in a transforming fellowship with him. Through these apostles, Jesus was forming the core of his church—a growing number of people gathered around him. These "followers" would *gather* around the Living Word of God, and then be *sent out* by him with the spoken word of proclamation, the gospel. Those sent out as his apostles (*apostellos* in Greek, meaning "sent out ones") would call others to gather around the King and share in his rule and reign, which had now drawn near. The others who believed in the gospel because of the apostle's words would also be transformed by Christ and be sent out with the good news to live as his representatives, citizens of his kingdom.

In the Gospel of Mark, we are told that Jesus took Simon and Andrew with him and called James and John, who also then left their fishing to follow Jesus (Mark 1:19-20). A little later, they bring to Jesus those who are sick or possessed by evil (Mark 1:32-34).

In his letter to the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul gives his own testimony concerning being called by the risen Christ: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Philippians 3:12).

To follow Jesus involves a *total belonging* to him that is both *renewing* and *transforming*. We become more than what we are or ever could be apart from him. What we are already in Christ's relationship to us, we become in ourselves as we "grow up" into Christ, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:15 (ESV). The dynamic communion that his followers have with Christ reflects the vital connection shown in the image of the Head with the Body. Such a transforming and life-giving relationship reminds us of Jesus' parable of the vine and branches:

> I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:1-5 ESV)

Summary and application

In summary, we note that the church belongs to Jesus Christ as his "called out" ones, his people. We belong to him in such a profound way that we can regard ourselves as his Body; as living stones built on, supported by, and arranged in relationship to him as the cornerstone with his apostles; and as Christ's bride, betrothed to him in a covenant fellowship of eternal love. These images remind us that the church belongs to God (through Jesus Christ and by the Spirit) totally and completely at the deepest level of its life and being.

In our day, we apply this truth as the church by continually recognizing our utter dependence on Jesus Christ—our need to live moment-by-moment in relationship, communion and fellowship with him. As the church, we are to find our life and mission in *response* to Jesus as the Living Word of God that he is.

The primary and central responsibility of the church (both its leaders and members) is to point each other to the Living Word, and his written Word. Under the direction of Jesus, the leaders of the church must lead according to his Word—they must know his written Word as deeply and completely as possible and then serve as examples of those who live under and in relationship to the Living Word of God according to the written word of God.

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 4

THE CHURCH AS GOD'S CREATION UNDER THE WORD

In Part 3 we saw that the church (*ekklesia*) is "gathered together" and "called out" as the people of God. This time we'll look at two additional ways Scripture defines the church.

1. *Creature* and *creation* of the Word of God (Living and written)

The church not only *belongs* to Jesus Christ, it's *called into being* by the Word of God. The church is thus the result of an act of creation (or re-creation) that resonates with the Genesis account of God saying, "Let there be," and "there was." God calls out to the church by his Word and says, "Let there be a people for my name." The church, then, is the *creature* and *creation* of the Word of God (both Living and written), from the Father, in the Holy Spirit. The church comes to exist by the grace of the triune God acting in time and space, and in flesh and blood on our behalf. The church's life is thus lived out under and in relationship to the Living Word. It has no other Lord, no other Savior, no other Redeemer. It is formed and shaped by our belonging to Jesus Christ as we hear and respond to him as God's Word to us. He tells us who he is and who we are in relationship to him as our Lord and Savior. He is the one who leads us to abundant life as we live out a relationship responding to him. The church then, is drawn together and formed and transformed in Jesus as those called together to live under him and by means of him, the Living Word. Though absent bodily, the Living Word is able to call and commune with us through his written Word—the words of the apostles and prophets inspired, preserved and illuminated by the Spirit for us.

Jesus gave himself and his word to the apostles, and by the Spirit Jesus spoke uniquely, authoritatively and once-for-all through these men. He entrusted to them his word and sent them out by his Spirit to proclaim his gospel. Now, by the same Spirit of Christ, we are given ears to hear him speaking again in and through the apostolic words of Holy Scripture, which serve as the final authority for us in all things pertaining to the life of faith and practice.

The apostolic writings of the New Testament point relentlessly to the fact that their authors regard Jesus Christ as their cornerstone—their authority. The apostles do not speak for themselves or by themselves—they are under the orders, directions and directives of their Source and Origin, Jesus Christ. Consequently, what these Christ-appointed apostles convey is not just information, data and facts. They pass on to us their receptivity, attitudes, approach and authoritative regard for the gift of revelation and the meaning of the message given them. Their subjective orientation and receptivity to the meaning of the message is also authoritative. We cannot receive what they have given us by separating the information conveyed from their personal receptivity to it, deciding for ourselves, apart from them, its meaning and significance. We cannot divide asunder the appointed messengers from the message without distorting it. We trust the written Word of God because the Living Word entrusted the apostles to be his interpreters, conveying accurately the content of the message, and the receptivity appropriate to the message.

If we trust Jesus Christ, we will trust in these apostles to be Jesus' interpreters. Refusing to do so would indicate a refusal to fully trust Jesus and the working of his Spirit. It would signal a calling into question of Christ's judgment, decision and wisdom in entrusting this vital responsibility to the apostles. In our

day, such a refusal would likely signal that we are making one or more of the following wrong assumptions:

1. That Jesus misjudged in selecting the original apostles to be his appointed interpreters.
2. That Jesus failed to take into account the historical, linguistic, cultural, social, intellectual and personal obstacles that we face in our day in being able to hear an authoritative word from Christ through the witness of his original apostles.
3. That the ministry of the Holy Spirit in inspiring and preserving the written Word was ineffective.

As a result of these wrong assumptions, we make the even bigger mistake of becoming our own final authority—taking it upon ourselves, apart from the biblical authors, to determine what Jesus' words mean. We then have no choice but to speculate about who God is and what he wants since we have predetermined in our own minds that God is not able to clearly and authoritatively communicate in our day anything normative for us and our salvation. Thus we can only resort to using our own methods trying to uncover the truth behind the biblical author's own understanding. When we regard the written Word of God as unreliable and incapable of conveying to us God's Word, even given the ministry of the Holy Spirit, then we rely on our own methods to sort through the data left behind in the biblical revelation. Taking this approach, we stand in judgment of the written Word, sifting through it to see if any of it ought to be believed, trusted and lived by, disregarding that this is exactly what the appointed biblical writers did.

There is also another, though opposite way, that some stand in judgment of the written Word. It involves seeking to hear and receive a Word from Jesus through the Spirit *apart from* a careful listening to the written Word. This approach results in an almost magical view of the Word where we think we hear God speaking through private revelations—subjective feelings, personal convictions, impressions—a sensing of what we *feel* God has said. Though looking for such subjective signals might include the reading of Scripture, that reading typically is rather casual, readily permitting us to take what the Word says out of context, and even thinking our own personal thoughts and opinions concerning its meaning are inspired by the Spirit. This approach indicates a distrust in the wisdom and judgment of Jesus, and in the capability of the Spirit to work in such a way that we are able to hear and receive a word from God spoken in and *through* the written Word of God, not apart from it, or apart from the way it was received by the apostles.

In approaching the written Word of God, we must be careful *not* to separate the Son of God from the Holy Spirit, or the Word of God from the Spirit of God. The members of the Trinity are not separated in their being or in their doing. Instead, they are perfectly coordinated, working together. They share completely the one will and purpose of God, which is to make God known and to draw us into right relationship with himself.

Perfectly capable of taking into account the limits of human language, the problems of transmission and translation and the socio-cultural context, the Father, Son and Spirit enable us to hear and respond to Christ the Living Word and cornerstone, and to those Christ appointed to author the church's foundation, the written Word of God. As leaders, we are called to serve the church by faithfully teaching and explaining to its members the written Word, which by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, puts us in contact with the Living Word of God. In this way, we facilitate the church living as the creature and creation of the Word of God, Living and so written.

2. Church *under* the Word of God (Living and written)

With Jesus at its center, shedding light on it all, the written Word of God is our authoritative source for hearing and living under the lordship of the incarnate Living Word of God as his Body the church. Although absent in body, by the presence of his Holy Spirit, we, the church, are enabled to hear Christ speak to us. He does so in and through the biblical words in such a way that we hear those words as a Word from him, not merely words from his apostles. Note these comments from the apostle Paul:

> We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)
>
> I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11-12)

Through Scripture, we receive the Word in the same way the apostles authoritatively first received it—being moved (illuminated) by the same Spirit. We receive this Word in a spirit of humility—a readiness to respond in faith, hope and love to the Speaker of this Word. Like Jesus' mother Mary, we both receive the Word and are responsive to it. We have "ears to hear" what he is saying, as noted by Paul: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17 ESV). We stand alongside the apostles to receive from them the word of God, receiving it in the same way they did as the word of the Living Word himself.

We then submit to the authority of that apostolic revelation, knowing it came to us by those who had been assigned by Jesus Christ. Submitting to biblical authority is about more than just analyzing its words, ideas, concepts and directives. We submit to the Living Word who speaks to us in the written Word by accepting, revering and mirroring the receptivity of the apostles and their submission to Christ and his Word to them. By the gift of the Spirit, we listen with the same ears to hear what those apostles had been given. Taking a purely "objective" or neutral stance towards the Word, which involves holding back on being receptive to it until after we've analyzed and judged it, amounts to a rejection that it truly is the Word of God, both written and Living. Receiving and benefitting from the objective content of the revelation given to the apostles preserved in Scripture, requires sharing in the same subjective orientation to the content of the message that those apostles had, namely *faith in the One who is speaking.* Hearing the objective word of God requires the working of the Spirit in our subjectivities so that we have the freedom to welcome and receive the Word of God. In short, we read and study Scripture by faith in the One whose Scripture it is.

Summary and implications

In the life and practice of the early church we find an openness toward and trust in the Word, both Living and written. When called together by the proclamation of the gospel, they gathered daily and weekly. What did they do? Note this:

> Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day [Pentecost]. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:41-42)

As *creature* and *creation* of the Word, in the Spirit, the church's worship and fellowship, along with its ministry and leadership, were generated and enlivened by the written Word, which is the Word of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Did you notice that the church "accepted" the message then "devoted themselves" to the teaching? Both the objective element of the message and the subjective element of personal receptivity or trust were in operation—by the grace of the working of the Spirit of Jesus among them. In our day, we recognize the written Word as belonging to the Living Word when we receive it and listen to it carefully in the same way as they did—led by the Spirit, under the direction of the apostles. In this way, the church, along with the apostles, bears witness to Jesus Christ and his Word, the cornerstone.

Here are two primary implications of the church being Christ's Body and being a *creature* and *creation* of his Word:

a) The Church is Christ's Body not ours. He remains Head of his Body still today. He remains Lord over his Body.

The church does not belong to us. We remain our Lord's Body and he remains its one and only Head. Body and Head are inseparably connected, but ordered as Head to the Body. Jesus remains Lord over his Body, the church, precisely because the church is his Body. He has not handed over his leadership/headship to us. The church does not have another head and needs no other earthly mediator. Jesus is still our great Mediator bearing our humanity, and making intercession for us. He, the Living Word, has provided us a witness to himself and to his Holy Spirit by means of the written Word. Note Paul's comment: "There is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5 ASV).

Thus we understand that the church does not create or sustain (perpetuate) itself. We are not in control of the church—it belongs to Christ. It is his Body, and belongs to no one else. It follows that there is only one ministry in his church, and that is Jesus Christ's ministry, not ours. He does not need us to stand in for him! Instead, he wants us to participate *with him,* in his ongoing ministry. We are guided in that participation by his written Word, which he has provided for us with his Spirit. By the Word and Spirit (always together, never separate) the church has its life and leadership. The church and its ministry belong to Christ as its Living Head who gives life to his Body by his Word. The church participates in his ongoing ministry in communion with the Living Word as addressed by the written Word, through which he calls the church together. Thus the church and Jesus Christ, though joined as a Body to its Head, are and remain distinct, yet inseparable.

b) Those leading in Christ's ministry lead first by following him, by being under him and his written Word, as interpreted in the light of who he is as the Living Word of God.

Church leaders are to lead by living under Christ's Word, modeling and teaching others to do so as well. Leaders are thus first *followers* of Christ, according to his Word. Knowing Christ according to his Word is a leader's most important task. One who leads in Christ's ministry must know the Living Word through his written Word.

The primary ministry of a leader is the ministry of the Word, Living and written. The primary ministry of the church, as a *creature* and *creation* of the Word, is to know and live in fellowship with the Living Word, responding to his written Word as did the apostles who were the human authors of that written

Word. All those who serve in the church, in one way or another, are called and appointed to lead in Christ's Body by first following Christ according to his Word.

A leader in the church never serves the church on his or her own, but in fellowship and communion with others who have gone before—those known to be faithful followers of Christ according to his Word. The church, with all its leaders, aims to be faithful to Christ and therefore to his Word.

Leaders in the Body of Christ, who know Christ according to his Word, gather others primarily by a proclamation concerning who Christ is according to his Word. Christ's Word, and who he is as expressed in his Word, is the drawing power. The proclamation of the good news (the gospel) is what calls together the church, the *called-out ones.* Thus church leaders seek not to draw attention to themselves, but to Christ. They bring not their own word, but seek to pass on to others Christ and his Word. Leaders (including pastors) are not the center of the church—that role is reserved for Christ, who is received in the Spirit, with and through his Word. The apostle Paul put it this way: "What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5).

The key to leadership in the church in all ages, including ours, is to *know and respond to Christ according to his Word*, *received in his Spirit.* This is what the apostles did, leading to the written Word. In our day, as we hear and respond by the Spirit, we are able to participate in what Jesus, by the Spirit, and through the church, is doing in our world.

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 5

THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY OF PROCLAMATION

In Part 4 we noted that the church is God's creation under the Word of God (both Living and written). This time we'll see how the central and defining goal of the church's ministry is to point to whose church it is by bearing witness to Christ, the head of his body. The church is committed to that ministry because it trusts, loves, honors, hopes in and worships God through Jesus Christ above all else, and because there is nothing better to pass on to others. Jesus is the best we have because the Father has given us the best that he has—his Son, by his Holy Spirit.

The church's primary ministry

The purpose of the church determines its primary ministry, which is to communicate (proclaim) by word and deed, who Jesus Christ is (according to his Word), then direct those in the church's care to Christ and his written Word, leading them toward repentance along with faith, hope and love for the triune God. The goal is that these people will grow in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which means growing up (maturing) into the fullness of Christ. Fundamental to their maturing in Christ is their participation in Christ's continuing ministry—a ministry both within the church and then beyond to those who are not yet members of the body of Christ.

This ministry of the church involves passing on to others what we (believers) have already been receiving from our Lord. The first thing he gives us (by his Word and Spirit) is knowledge and awareness of himself. We first discover who he is and then who we are in relationship to him. Then we discover who others are, also in relationship to him. The ministry of passing on what we have received (proclamation) centers on identifying to others who Christ is, what he has done for them and their salvation, and who they are now in ongoing relationship with him. In short, we can say that the ministry of the church is *to know Christ and make him known.*

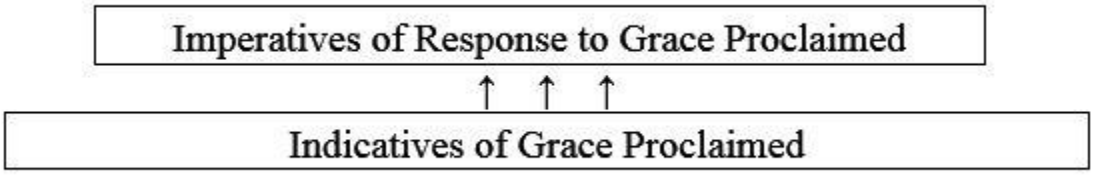
Proclamation of the gospel

The special Greek word in the New Testament for the central task and focus of the church's ministry is *kerygma,* which means "proclamation." It corresponds in meaning to the Greek word *euangelízomai,* which means "proclaim the gospel." In the New Testament, this word is often translated "preach." Indeed, the church exists to hear and receive the gospel and then proclaim (preach, communicate) it to others. Some modern approaches to this preaching fall short of this biblical purpose, by focusing merely on conveying "nuggets" of biblical knowledge, or on telling people what they should (or should not) do using various techniques to move (sometimes coerce) people to take action. With these approaches, the preacher is sometimes viewed as someone with special (even secret) knowledge, derived from Scripture or even from a message directly from God. In contrast, the goal of truly biblical preaching is primarily to proclaim who Jesus is and what he has done for us, then who we are in relationship to him as revealed to us in the written Word of God. This gospel-focused preaching asks and answers, from the Bible, a vital question: *Who are you Lord?*

The indicatives must precede the imperatives

Such preaching calls for a response from the hearer to the truth that is being proclaimed. Providing direction concerning a proper response is an appropriate part of the message. We see Peter doing this in

his sermon recorded in Acts 2:14-40 where the *indicatives* (the grammatical term for a statement of fact) of God's grace are announced first, telling the listeners about God's promises and how these were fulfilled in Jesus who he identifies and proclaims to be Lord and Christ. This proclamation provides a foundation on which Peter then rests the *imperatives* (the grammatical term for commands) of his hearers' response to God's grace. Peter's sermon prompted this question from his hearers: "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter's reply to that question was this: "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins…" Note the order and priority here, as indicated in this diagram:



We see the same order and priority in Jesus' proclamations of the gospel, including this: "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). "The kingdom of God has come near" is the *indicative* (which comes first) and "repent and believe the good news" is the *imperative* that follows. Thus the indicative calls forth the imperative, namely repentance grounded in faith in what was proclaimed. Preaching that fulfills the primary ministry of the church always follows this pattern, which is found throughout the New Testament. Any and every imperative in our proclamations must be built on the indicatives of the good news of Jesus Christ—who he is and what he has done and has promised. That proclamation will include the truth that Jesus is Lord, that as Lord he reveals God, that he has reconciled all people to God, and that he has established his kingdom (rule and reign), which has broken into the world (is "near"), to be revealed in all its fullness when Jesus returns to earth in glory (thus establishing our hope for the future).

Proclamation with words…

Faithful proclamation of these gospel truths appropriately uses words, concepts, ideas and illustrations in order to give faithful witness to who Christ is. Such proclamation always places itself under the authority of the apostolic witness of Scripture, no matter what the genre of the particular passage being expounded (be it historical, figurative, symbolic or theological). Our proclamations (including our doctrinal statements, stories, testimonies, etc.) will, appropriately, use additional words to explain and help listeners understand the normative witness of Scripture. But our words, witnessing faithfully to the proclamation of the gospel in Scripture, must be weighed and tested for alignment with the reality of the identity of God in Christ to which the Bible normatively, irreplaceably and unsurpassably points. And of course, we do not do this weighing and testing on our own, but in ongoing fellowship with those who have gone before us, and with those with whom we are in ongoing, worshipping communion.

…and deeds

The church, through its ministry (including its worship) under the authority of Christ and his written Word, bears witness to the One it proclaims and worships. It does this not only with *words* of witness, but also with *deeds* (actions) that confirm and corroborate the words. Such actions are a true witness to

Christ when they accurately proclaim the indicatives of grace through deeds reflecting and thus showing forth the imperatives of grace. Such deeds point to the same character seen in Jesus, and so direct people to him.

Words take precedence

Though deeds are vital, proclamation using words takes precedence because, as Scripture tells us, "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17 NKJV). Why is that so? Because the primary things declared in the gospel cannot be seen and thus cannot be exemplified in deeds alone. For example, the eternal existence of God before time cannot be seen. The eternal unity yet distinction in Persons of the Trinity cannot be seen. The eternal purposes of God for the entire cosmos cannot be seen or demonstrated. The meaning and significance of the cross of Christ cannot be seen or exemplified. The resurrection and its meaning cannot be seen or exemplified. The hope of the coming kingdom cannot be seen. God's yet unfulfilled promises cannot be seen (including the promise of Christ's return). The nature of the Holy Spirit and the movement of ministry of the Holy Spirit cannot be directly seen or predicted or demonstrated by our deeds. God's ultimate justice, providence and victory over all evil cannot be seen or demonstrated. All these and more can only be conveyed by passing on a message using words—words that indeed can be heard by those who have "ears to hear." And that is the primary way the faith, hope and love of the church is nourished and strengthened.

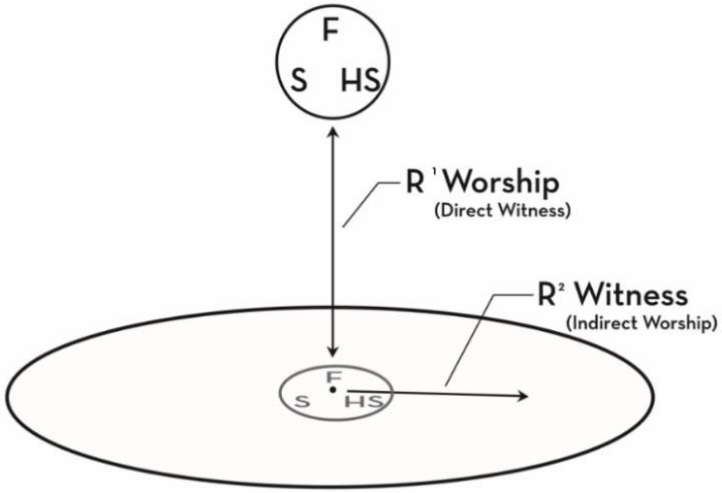
Conclusion: equipping for proclamation

The central vocation (ministry) of the church is to bear witness to Jesus Christ, and the primary way that takes place is by means of proclamation (preaching and teaching)—largely with words, but also with deeds that confirm the words, with the words of the gospel of Jesus Christ interpreting the deeds that are being done in his name. Thus the primary responsibility of those who pastor and otherwise have a leadership role in the church is to know Christ and to make him known through such proclamation. Accordingly, we as a church must emphasize equipping of leaders (pastors and ministry leaders) in formal and informal ways for the church's ministry of proclamation.

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 6

THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY OF WORSHIP AND WITNESS

As we noted in Part 5 of this essay, the primary focus of the church's ministry is to proclaim Christ. That proclamation occurs in multiple ways, including (as we saw in part 5) through Christ-centered preaching. This time we'll see how proclamation also occurs through the church's worship and witness. As shown in the diagram below, *worship* (R1) is the church's direct witness to Christ through its vertical interaction with the Father (F), Son (S) and Holy Spirit (HS) as we gather for worship services. *Witness* (R2) is the church's indirect worship of the triune God through its horizontal interaction with the world, reaching out (locally and globally) to proclaim the gospel. Note that worship and witness, along with preaching, go together in proclaiming Christ.



The church's worship (R1) and witness (R2)

Worship (direct witness)

The first responsibility of church leaders is seeing that the Word of God (Living and written) is proclaimed in and through the church's worship. Biblical worship is first about who God is, not what we do for God, or even who we are in relationship to God. With this God-ward focus, worshippers are helped to respond to who God in Christ is revealed to be. In worship, we are freed by the Spirit to respond with faith, hope and love for Jesus Christ as we confess our need for forgiveness and receive God's grace.

The content of worship

The content of the church's worship should involve the reading of Scripture along with the declaration (via preaching and/or discussion) of its message centering on Jesus Christ. That presentation should be done in a way that draws out from the hearers a Spirit-led response of prayer, praise, thanksgiving and confession. The worship service should then provide multiple opportunities for such response to be expressed. Primary ways are the giving of offerings and the administration of the church's two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is GCI's recommendation (but not requirement) that the Lord's Supper be conducted weekly.

When conducted properly, worship points people to Christ, ushering them into his presence. By the Spirit, Jesus truly is present in our worship, serving (as noted in Hebrews 8:1-2) as the church's one true Worship Leader (*Leitourgos*) and High Priest. The worship of the church is thus our participation in Jesus' worship of the Father, which he gives in our place and on our behalf. That worship has two dimensions: God to humans, and humans to God.

The God-humanward dimension of worship

The church's worship first involves *receiving from God*—from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Jesus, our High Priest and Worship Leader, first ministers the things of God to us, making God known and giving us all the blessings that he accomplished for us in his earthly ministry in the name of the Father. Jesus thus mediates to us both the *revelation* and the *reconciliation* of the Father. This is the God-humanward dimension of Jesus' High Priestly ministry, and this is where the church's worship begins (and thus continues).

The human-Godward dimension of worship

The church's worship also involves *responding to God*—in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father. Note that this human-Godward dimension of worship is also Christ's ministry on our behalf. Jesus not only brings the things of God to us, but takes us with him to the Father. Having reconciled us to the Father, Jesus leads us into the Father's presence. As our Worship Leader and High Priest, Jesus leads us in our worship of the Father.

Our sanctification

Every response of faith, hope and love that Jesus makes toward God, he makes in our place and on our behalf. He then sends the Spirit so that we, more and more, may share in his responses on our behalf to God. This is the life of being *sanctified*. It is a life grounded in and flowing out from the work of the Son of God who, in our place, assumed our fallen nature.

Jesus' faithful responses to God were the outcome of his overcoming temptation and his victory over evil. Through his sacrificial life that culminated in his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus took our fallen human nature and recreated and regenerated (sanctified) it. And now, through the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit, we grow up into Christ—so that our lives might be more and more receptive and conformed to him, sharing in Jesus' own sanctified human mind and heart, coming to love the will and ways of God. Flowing from our renewed lives in Christ comes the desire to share Christ with others so they too can join in.

The role of the Holy Spirit

This ministry of the Holy Spirit is thus essential for our sanctification/transformation. The Spirit, who is sent to us from the Son in the Father's name, and from the Father in the Son's name, is the same Spirit who the incarnate Son of God received for us at his baptism. He always had the eternal Spirit for himself as a member of the Trinity, but from the point of his baptism, he also came to have the Spirit for us, in his own human form. Jesus has the Holy Spirit for us so that we also, as human beings, might be indwelt by the Spirit. For that to happen, the human nature Jesus assumed had to be sanctified as he lived his life as our great High Priest. So Jesus is said in Scripture to have *sanctified himself* (John 17:19), that is,

his human nature. As we share in our great High Priest's responses, especially in worship, we bear witness to this truth and reality.

Thus, from beginning to end, the Triune God is the subject of biblical worship. Worship is not about us, not even about how well we worship. Jesus Christ, as our great High Priest, is present and active. He first ministers to us in the name of the Father and by the Holy Spirit. Then he takes our worship, joins it with his own, and in doing so perfects it—sanctifies it, as it "reaches" the Father. In worship we look away from ourselves. In humility we even forget ourselves, looking to be reminded of who God is so that we might respond simply, but fully, to the truth and reality of who he is as proclaimed in his Word and also through our actions as we gather for worship.

Worship through music

Though music is certainly an important aspect of our worship, it should not be used in ways that draw attention to itself or to the musicians. Instead, worship music should point to the true object of our worship, our Triune God. Worship is not entertainment put on for others to watch. All worship leaders should strive to help other worshippers re-apprehend God in his revelation and promote (make room for) participation in worship that focuses on God, providing and supporting ways to respond to who God is according to his self-revelation. None of our worship is perfect—all of it needs to be sanctified as we join in worship with our great High Priest and Worship Leader Jesus Christ. We offer all our worship to him for his sanctification, which he graciously and even happily accomplishes on our behalf, leading us into the presence of the Father by the Spirit.

Worship through preaching

As we noted last time, preaching is an essential and large part of our worship. The focus of preaching is to identify and remind ourselves of the nature and character of God as revealed in Jesus. The content of preaching will be Scripture as it points us to our Triune God and our life in him. Such preaching is not primarily about conveying information (as is the case with teaching). Preaching aims to strengthen and encourage in the hearers a response of faith, hope and love on the basis of who our Triune God has revealed himself to be: our Lord and Savior.

Biblical preaching does not primarily address the will, telling people what or how to do something for God. Instead, it proclaims the nature and character of God in Christ, speaking in his name and on his behalf to the hearers, addressing them in a way that calls forth their faith, hope and love for God. As this response is awakened in them by the Spirit, the hearers may be guided in making appropriate responses to God's grace, love, forgiveness and transforming presence through acts of obedience, which includes direct and indirect acts of witness (see the section below). The church then has the responsibility to provide opportunities that make room for this response in the context of worship, through praise and adoration, prayer, confession of sin, singing, testimony (in words or perhaps in actions such as dance, works of art, music), and most especially by baptism and regularly sharing in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper following the proclamation of the Word of God in preaching and Scripture reading.

Witness (indirect worship)

The church also offers opportunities for the hearers to express their faith, hope and love for God outside the worship service. Such opportunities are typically referred to as "outreach events," and rightly so. God's love reaches out, calling us to himself and away from all that alienates us from him. Outreach

events proclaim the gospel, thus pointing people to the God revealed in Jesus. Such outreach (witness) events are indirect witnesses to who God is. Though they might focus more on deeds (actions) than words, their source, and the identity of Christ's church, should never be hidden or obscured. All we do we do in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The range of deeds in outreach events can be quite varied. Evangelism is a form of outreach and comes in many varieties. Not all of them, however, are equally faithful. Sharing the gospel with non-believers, as directly as is allowed or appropriate in a given context, is the key. The form of evangelism should match the content of our evangelistic message, which focuses on the free grace of God and call for repentance and faith to receive God's mercy and kindness. Deeds proclaiming the gospel include acts of kindness, service and assistance that convey faith, hope and love for God and love for others in his name. This "missional" activity will largely be focused on reaching out to the church's immediate context (neighborhood, community; socio-economic setting). However, at times, it will also reach out to other communities and cultures, even to other nations, in what is referred to as "missionary" activity. Our outreach, therefore, is both local and global.

Disciple-making

Another important aspect of the church's witness is commonly referred to as disciple-making (or making disciples, quoting Jesus' command in Matthew 28:18 to "make disciples of all nations"). To make disciples is to help people grow in their faith, hope and love for God outside of the time of worship. The primary focus of this disciple-making is the character (being) of the disciple—God is far more concerned about what kind of people we become than in what we do for him. The quality of what we do for him depends, to a large degree, on the kind of persons we are—our nature, character, spirit.

Disciple-making activities lie somewhere between worship and witness (outreach) and can take many forms. It can occur one-on-one, in small groups, in classes (such as Sunday school) and in formal education such as ACCM or GCS courses. It can also take place through reading authors (both ancient and contemporary) who are mature in their faith, hope and love for God. A key concept here is that no one grows in the faith on their own. We all are made for community, and we mature in community. We find healing and wholeness in being members of the body of Christ. We should not expect that a weekly worship service provides all that a believer needs to grow up into the maturity of Christ.

Thus pastoral leaders need to provide resources (especially from their own faith community—GCI in our case) along with hands-on opportunities that will help members grow in their devotion to God and knowledge of his Word, thus growing in Spirt-led lives that express joyful obedience to God. Such opportunities will include involving members in the outreach, service and mission activities of the church. It also, at times, will mean providing pastoral counseling and, if needed, referral to professional counselors for individual, marital, or family counseling.

Know the "cultural soup we swim in"

In all aspects of the church's worship and witness (including disciple-making), each church must be aware of and responsive to the social, economic and intellectual-educational context in which they live, and to which they seek to reach out. We need to know our "audience," which means knowing the "cultural soup" they "swim" in! This "soup" includes influences, forces and cultural patterns, including some that tempt us to depart from Christ and his ways, or at least misinform us about God and his ways.

Special resources are often needed to help us "read" (interpret) the culture. Such awareness will help direct and focus the assistance we are able to provide to those we are called to serve. That assistance will include pointing out evil where it exists and is damaging to the communities we serve. The church will provide, as it is able, the resources of its own community and assistance to those caught in sinful or evil circumstances to find spiritual healing and hope and practical ways to escape sin and its damaging effects.

The church in the world

The central task of the church and the goal of its ministry is not to change anything. The church is not primarily a social change agent. That is not its calling. Rather, its God-ordained vocation is to point to Jesus Christ—to know him and to make him known. That includes knowing and loving God's purposes and ways and what it means to be a human being in right relationship with God.

If there is to be change in the world, be it small or great, it will come about as God enables members of the body of Christ to make use of their education, wealth and vocations outside the immediate membership of the church. Change will come to the wider world as church members build relationships outside the immediate church community. Such relationship-building will, no doubt, be resisted at times. But it also will be received by some, leading to individuals in one's sphere of influence becoming worshipers of God through our direct witness (we call it evangelism).

However, the overall social structures of the world may or may not change much as a result of our evangelism, even when individuals are renewed and transformed by God's grace. Such massive change is up to the providence of God. As his representatives, bearing his message of revelation and reconciliation, we bear and embody partial, provisional and temporary signs of the coming fullness of his rule and reign. Our task is about building up the church of Jesus Christ and not about building the kingdom of God on earth. God is Lord over history; his kingdom rule and reign has been inaugurated already and will come to fullness upon Christ's return. Of that we can be sure. In the meantime, we live in hope, actively bearing witness to that hope here and now, whether or not there is much or any social, political, or economic change.

Conclusion: the church's primary vocation

We conclude by noting that the church's calling (vocation) is to bear witness to who Jesus Christ is, and to then invite others to receive him, responding to him in repentance and faith—entering into a life-long relationship with him as their Lord and Savior. Acting as a kind of spiritual midwife, we introduce people to Jesus and help them enter a relationship with him of faith, hope and love, becoming worshipers of the Triune God. God is seeking such worshipers, and we join him in this primary ministry of witness, directly through our worship and indirectly through our outreach involving evangelism, service and mission. Thus we understand that the primary vocation of the church and its leadership is to be faithful to Christ—to know him and to direct others to him through the church's words and deeds of proclamation. Note how the apostle Paul makes this point:

> That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. (Romans 1:15-16)

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 7

ON BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST

How is the church to operate?

Though the New Testament does not give a lot of detail concerning how the church is to function, it does specify certain patterns and practices that build off of and are arranged according to the theological insights we already have looked at in this essay. As the body of Christ, the church is called to live out its life according to whose church it is and how it is related to the one to whom it belongs and from whom it derives its life and vocation. The church is thus to operate in accordance with its God-given nature, whether that operation is specified in general principles or in particular New Testament descriptions of the church's form and structure. Another way to say this is that the church is to be built up with Christ as its living cornerstone, with its foundation being the written Word of God (Scripture) interpreted in line with the Living Word of God (Jesus Christ).

What, if anything, does the New Testament teach us as being normative for the life of a local church (congregation) in our day? Answering that question requires discernment, taking into account the whole counsel of God regarding how the parts fit into the whole. The greatest potential pitfall in this discernment process is taking a particular event or practice in the church recorded in the New Testament, then assuming it is a principle or norm that should be applied to the whole church in all times and places, including ours.

Descriptions of the early church (with many of them found in the book of Acts) do not automatically serve as *prescriptions* for how the church universal ought to be. However, some of these descriptions may be expressions of more general patterns that can and should be emulated throughout the church universal. Discerning which is which, requires exploring whether or not there is more explicit teaching in the New Testament that presents such ways of operating as general principles or norms for the whole church.

As we engage in this discernment process, we first acknowledge that many practical details of how a church should function are not specified in the New Testament. That is so because in the New Testament, there is a three-fold assumption at work: 1) that Jesus will remain in living contact with his church through the active ministry of the Holy Spirit, 2) that the church will have the written Word of God to consult, and 3) that the church will have overseers (pastors) and other leaders who, following the Spirit and Scripture, will possess the wisdom, gifts and experience needed to lead the church in the way of Jesus. Thus we understand that not every aspect of the church's operations needs to be specified in Scripture. God apparently decided that his gifts of the guiding Spirit, the inspired written Word, and anointed leadership are sufficient for Jesus to remain Lord of his body, the church.

What then can we learn from Scripture about the particular form and shape of a local church, built as it is in communion with Christ as its Lord and Savior by the Spirit? This question leads us back to passages in the New Testament that speak directly to the church being the body of Christ. In this section of the essay we'll consider not so much the vital relationship of the body to its Head, but the dynamic relationship of the members with each other. This issue is addressed in several New Testament passages, particularly in Ephesians 4, Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 11. This time we'll focus on Ephesians 4.

Many members, one body

The primary dynamic of the life in the body of Christ being highlighted in each of these passages is how there are many members yet one body. The problem being addressed is the fallen human tendency to want to go our own way and thus undo the unity of the church, or for that unity to be regarded in such a way that the distinction of the many is diminished. Though unity and diversity are often at odds with one another, in the body of Christ and by the Spirit they go together, though how they go together takes discernment—it's not a mindless union, nor does it occur automatically, as Paul makes clear. True unity with diversity is a miracle of the Spirit of Jesus that must be purposefully received and thus shared in.

In Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul describes key elements of life in the body of Christ. He shows that our response to what our Lord has done (and is doing) in building his one church begins by recognizing the worth of Christ and all he has done for us and given to us. As we recognize that worth, we will live in a way that allows us to show forth that we belong to Christ, displaying…

> …humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love," being "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:2-3)

Out of this center of our relationship with Christ arises our relationship with one another. Our oneness as the body of Christ is the oneness that results from us being bound together to Jesus Christ—the one we worship and the one to whom we are called to bear both direct and indirect witness. Only as these characteristics arise out of our relationship with Christ will the many members of his one body, the church, be able to maintain or act according to the unity given it by Christ himself, for as Paul says,

> There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6)

Notice how the indicative of the grace (the gift of oneness we are given in Christ) is the ground (reason or basis) for our living out and thus manifesting that oneness. The gift of oneness thus precedes what we do to live it out in our corporate life. Indeed, each congregation of the body of Christ is called to manifest and so testify to the oneness of Christ. This is also the calling of each denomination (collections or associations of congregations). All members, congregations, and denominations should be concerned to bear witness to the oneness of Christ's body, the church. Though there are a variety of congregations and denominations, in reality there is but one church. Each "part" of the church ought to recognize, bear witness to, and so maintain that unity as much as possible. To do so is to have what is commonly referred to as an ecumenical spirit (with *ecumenical* meaning "pertaining to the whole"). Where there are certain divisions that compromise this wholeness, efforts should be made to restore unity.

This does not mean that there cannot be certain kinds of differences between congregations and denominations. Some differences do not betray the essential unity of the body of Christ. Examples would be speaking different languages or meeting in different locations. We must not define the unity of the church in accordance with some idea or ideal of our own invention. Certain notions of unity—namely absolute uniformity in all things at all levels, of every kind—rule out Christ's kind of unity, a unity that makes room for (and even encourages) certain kinds of diversity.

The church's identifying "marks"

What then defines the church's unity? As stated in the Nicene Creed, the one church is identified by four particular "marks" (signs): 1) the church is one, 2) it is holy, 3) it is catholic (meaning universal) and, 4) it is apostolic. During the Reformation these marks were qualified by noting that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, being built on and sustained by Christ, is regulated by the preaching of the Word of God, the right offering of the sacraments (the Lord's Supper and baptism), and the maintenance of holy discipline. Thus all four marks of the church, so qualified, direct our focus onto Christ, the one living cornerstone and foundation of his church.

The church's *oneness* comes from being joined to Christ, for he is what the members of his body have in common. The church's *holiness* is not originally its own—the church shares in Christ's holiness as a continuing gift of grace. The church's *universality* (its catholic nature, its wholeness), is also a gift that has to do with receiving its whole life from Christ through the Holy Spirit. The church's *apostolicity* comes from its living under the authoritative word of Christ's original apostles preserved for us in their authorized writings. Apostolicity also means that the church participates in Christ's *mission—it* is sent out as those first apostles were, with the same message to witness in surrounding communities and the world as a whole.

While there are many practical questions that could be explored, we have in these marks a good foundation to fill out a bit the nature of Christ's church and its unity in him so that we can begin to differentiate between the kinds of "diversity" that cause division or schism, and the kinds that are vital for church health—a diversity that demonstrates the multifaceted flourishing of Christ's church, his one body. We'll look at that issue more in Part 8 of this essay.

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 8

RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE BODY OF CHRIST

In Part 7 we looked at Paul's comparison of the church (the body of Christ) to the human body. Paul compares Christ (the head of the church) with the head of a human body, which governs, oversees and so regulates the different "members" of the body. Though this comparison did not control Paul's understanding of the relationship of Christ with his body, the church, there are overlapping points that we need to understand.

In comparing the human body to the church, Paul took advantage of the intuitive sense in ancient times that life flows from and so is directed by a person's head, out into and through the body like a river that begins at its source or head-waters, then flows downstream into a river. Seeing, hearing and speaking—all the fundamental communicative aspects—came from the head, not the other parts of the body. Thus severing a hand or leg, for example, would have a very different effect than decapitation, which would always lead to death of the whole body. So the head was thought to have life-giving, life-directing authority over the whole body.

In various passages in his epistles, Paul makes use of this asymmetry of relationship between the head and the body to point to both vital connection and asymmetrical dependence. Paul's point is that Christ has absolute authority as Lord to give and direct the life of the members of his body who belong to him in closest association. Unlike the relationship between the human head and human body, Christ is in no way dependent upon his body, the church, and the church is utterly dependent on its head, Jesus Christ.

Paul also used the head/body comparison to indicate that Christ himself, by the Spirit, coordinates the action among the many, diverse members of the body. Without Christ as its head, the various limbs and parts are unable to act in harmony. Thus Paul regarded Christ, the head, as ordering or harmonizing all the functions of his body, the church, giving it coordinated unity even though it has many different, distinct members. In that regard, note these two passages:

> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good…. God has so adjusted the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Cor. 12:7; 24-25 RSV)
>
> Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love. (Eph. 4:15-16)

These passages make clear that the members of the body are to relate not only to their head, Jesus Christ, but also to each other. Paul is making this point because (particularly in Corinth) he is addressing churches on the verge of dysfunction, if not outright disunity. The kind of unity with difference or diversity that God seeks to bring about in his people, the church, is beyond what nature, especially fallen and corrupted human nature, is able to produce. Such unity is the fruit of belonging to Jesus Christ. On its own, fallen human nature tends towards either individual autonomy (yielding social anarchy), or towards externally enforced uniformity (yielding totalitarianism). Human societies tend to swing from one extreme to the other, and then back again. God's way of unity with difference is a unique expression of his *agapē* love.

Ruled by love

Paul's governing insight was that all relationships between persons or groups of persons are to be informed, moved and regulated and so disciplined by God's *agapē* love, provided as a gift of grace to his people. This love purifies and cleanses and repurposes the natural loves: family love, marital love and friendships. That love is first demonstrated in the relationship between the Triune Persons, seen concretely in Jesus in his relationship with the Father. Secondly, it is seen in Jesus' words and deeds towards all he came in contact with. That love culminated in Jesus giving his life for us in his crucifixion and resurrection, ascension and promised return. So every word and act of the members of his body in relationship to each other are to be moved and measured by conformity to and even sharing in God's kind of love.

The crowning passage that lays this all out is 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul concludes corrective instruction to the church related to its lack of unity, causing them to be poor witnesses to Christ and keeping them from experiencing the fullness of Christ's life-giving, fruitful love. In Corinthians 13 (often called the "love chapter"), the love of God, which was displayed in the life of Christ, is beautifully described in words. Paul wrote this passage to spell out clearly that it is only as we share in and live out of our relationship to Christ and his love that we are able to relate to one another in ways that bring about a fruitful unity and diversity in loving relationship, fellowship and communion.

Fruits govern gifts

Other related passages are Romans 12:6-8, where Paul lists some of the gifts of the Spirit, given for ministry. In Galatians 5:22-26, Paul addresses the fruit of the Spirit, which along with Colossians 3:12-15 addresses the attitudes and behaviors that ought to be exhibited by those who belong to Christ. These passages, like 1 Corinthians 13, describe the shape of God's kind of *agapē* love that was visible in the life of Jesus. The upshot is that the many gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit are to be exercised according to the fruit of the Spirit—both are from the one Spirit ministering in each person's life. The gifts and the fruit should not be disconnected in our practice of ministry. Gifts used in a way that do not exhibit the fruit of the Spirit are being misused. Such misuse needs to be discouraged.

A certain kind of unity with a certain kind of difference

Let's look at a few things in Paul's teaching found in these passages about relationships in the life of the church. First, Paul teaches that there are real differences between the various members. The particular differences mentioned have to do with the variety of gifts given to the church, each uniquely contributing to Christ's continuing ministry. In particular, Paul notes that these differences are ordered (structured or arranged) so that they work together, or complement one another. But the different parts are not interchangeable; they are not equal in that sense. The hand is not the foot; the ear is not the eye. There are more presentable and less presentable parts.

This insight, that the differences mean that no member with their gift is interchangeable with another, and so are not equal in that sense, is bound to offend modern-day, Western thinkers. Inter-changeability is practically the one and only test of just and right relationships in our culture. Equality of any and every sort is measured by that criterion—are the persons interchangeable? If not, the situation is judged to be unequal and therefore unjust, not to mention unloving.

In that social/political framework, equality, equity and justice are thought to be achieved primarily by removing all significant differences between people so that they are interchangeable. That has become the predominant test of right relationship in the modern West—a norm that has extended into every area of modern democratic life so that it now extends far beyond the economic or political spheres of life to include the most personal of relationships, not just between government and citizens or between employer and employee. The near ubiquity of this simplistic and secular norm of justice has led to the church uncritically absorbing it into its own life—often promoted in terms of demanding individual "rights." However, it is not to be that way within the church, the body of Christ.

The gift of salvation is not a right, nor is being a member of the body of Christ. How one then serves in the church is not a right (and that includes ordination). In short, the body of Christ is not a one-person, one-vote democracy (even if some of the ways it functions might make use of democratic mechanisms to accomplish some of its less personal tasks).

Furthermore, inter-changeability is not the test of love, equality, or even justice in the church. Our equality is in our relationship with Jesus Christ, and in our shared and equal need for his grace and love. *We all are equal before the Lord at the foot of his cross.* We all stand there equally under our Jesus' direction and lordship. We all worship him alone and live in submission to him and to his good and right will according to his Word. We are equally recipients of his grace!

In our relationships with one another, we are not equal in every respect—we are not interchangeable parts. Each one of us has something to give the body that others can't, and each must receive from others what they can't give themselves. We are given these different, non-interchangeable gifts for ministry (service) in Jesus' name. We all serve as our Lord's representatives, sharing our gifts and receiving from others as God has arranged, ordered and structured the non-interchangeable members of the one body of Christ. In that way, *all* our relationships can bear fruit by the irreducible difference among the members coordinated by Christ, who is our unity.

Abuse of the differences

Because we live in the "present evil age," the differences that exist between members can open up opportunities for abuse. This is true even though we are joined to Jesus Christ and participate by the Spirit in his sanctified human nature—the "stain of sin" continues to take its toll. Because that is so, Paul addresses this problem. Some of the Christians he was writing to were misusing the differences of ministry giftings to assert their superiority over others. Others were reacting to the differences by declaring their autonomy saying, "I have no need of others." Some apparently denigrated themselves as having lesser gifts, ones less "respectable," and saying they had nothing to offer.

Paul declares that all of these, perhaps natural, responses are distortions. All the gifts for ministry are given as God pleases. He distributes them as he sees fit. The wisdom behind the difference and distribution of gifts is that the body of Christ needs a whole range of gifts. But that does not mean that they cannot be harmonized or that all are not valuable. Paul declares that Christ can indeed enable them to work together to build up the body, with each member having an important part to play, contributing to the common good. It takes God's *agapē* love to eliminate pride, envy and jealousy and the friction they generate so that there can be a fruitful gift exchange allowing the body to "upbuild itself in love," as Paul indicates (see Ephesians 4:12-13). This is the purpose for the beautiful unity and difference in the body of Christ.

Non-hierarchical order

Given the brokenness of our imaginations, we have a difficult time thinking that there can be order and structure if it is not one of hierarchical power. Sometimes the only alternative to hierarchical power we can imagine is one of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency. It seems that we can't imagine a non-hierarchical order or structure to life. So we often tend to eliminate hierarchy and with it order or structure and put everything and everyone on a level plane, where the differences are ignored or eliminated and each individual does his or her "own thing." When that approach doesn't work, we then seek to reestablish relationships of hierarchical power and control that forces a certain kind of uniformity on all, accepting the fact that such imposition of external power will violate any substantial differences and thus hinder true free gift-exchanges between all members, great and small.

Though this dilemma is especially prevalent in the West, no society is able to manage easily or naturally the unity and difference exhibited in the body of Christ. It is common for the differences between persons or groups to be used by the stronger to take advantage of the weaker. But the solution is not to eliminate the differences, for when that happens, especially at the level of more personal kinds of relationships and especially in the church, persons are damaged in the opposite way. Each will seek to assert themselves, seeking self-sufficiency, becoming isolated, lonely and not likely particularly productive. Or alternatively, each will simply conform in a tightly uniform way to an external, impersonal power and control, muting any real freedom, creativity and unique contribution. The natural way of fallen human societies runs towards one extreme or the other—towards totalitarianism or towards anarchy.

Differences used to bless

In the body of Christ, through the work of the Spirit, under the lordship of Christ, the differences between members become a source of blessing to others, not an excuse to take advantage of others. The differences are of God's gifting and those differences are life-giving. They make possible the wonderful gift exchange that can take place when pride is put in its place at the foot of the cross. Giving and receiving can be free. The exchange of gifts becomes part of our participation in the resurrection of Christ's love among us. When all our "strings" are attached to Christ, we can love one another with no strings attached. When that happens, the new humanity founded in Christ begins to show through.

The kinds of differences that are good, right and fruitful in the body of Christ are not moral differences (right relationship between persons) nor are they at root spiritual differences (right relationship with God). All expressions of healthy difference remain under the Lordship of Christ and the exercise of his kind of love—a love, designated *agapē* in the New Testament. This kind of love has a certain shape that brings glory to God and demonstrates his purposes for humanity.

Not every kind of diversity

Not all differences of every kind belong in the body of Christ. Unity in Christ does rule out certain kinds of differences, including those that are inherently divisive. The kinds of differences Paul speaks of in his epistles are ones of gifts of ministry for the common good given by the Holy Spirit. We can designate these as "practical differences." These differences are not moral, having to do with right and loving relationships between persons involving right and wrong behavior/interaction, nor are they spiritual, having to do with right relationship (right faith, hope and love) between God and humans, in Christ,

according to scriptural teaching. How we use the differing gifts, however, is a moral and spiritual issue! All gifts of the Spirit must be used according to the fruit of the Spirit.

This is why we have, along with the teaching about a proper unity and diversity of the body of Christ, directives on church discipline indicating that there are those who are to be corrected in love regarding wrong relationships between members. Such discipline, at times, can lead to individuals being excluded from regular participation in the fellowship (see 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 9-13; Gal. 6:1; 2 Thess. 3:15; 1 Tim. 1:18-20; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 4:1-5; Titus 1:5-16; 3:8-11). When done in true love *(agapē),* such discipline, even if it means disfellowshipping, will be exercised with the hope of repentance, reformation and eventual reconciliation.

That not all differences can be tolerated within the church is also indicated by the many passages of Scripture warning against false teachers and admonishing adherence to the teaching of the apostles. That teaching, which was authorized by Christ, faithfully captures the truth and reality of God's revelation culminating in Jesus Christ. Certain differences can arise that attack and undermine the unity found in Jesus Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. So God gives his body compassionate and wise members who are to exercise discernment, and on that basis practice church discipline. It is the responsibility of church leaders to "discern the spirits" (1 John 4:1) and the key to doing so is to know Christ and his Word and to be in consultation with others.

Jesus' judgment not condemnation

Jesus made such discernments in his own ministry. Though he welcomed all, not all stayed with him. He offered stiff and direct words of warning to those who resisted him and his revelation of the Father—those who rejected their need for mercy and grace. While Jesus extended God's forgiveness to all, he warned against those who rejected God's grace, especially those who rejected the Holy Spirit of God who he would send in the Father's name. Jesus recognized the spiritual danger of rejecting his freely-given grace and mercy, and especially of rejecting the Holy Spirit and his witness to Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. He would not have been loving with God's kind of love had he overlooked this fact and instead just aimed to be nice or leave everyone alone.

Jesus' words about not *judging* are completely misunderstood if taken to mean no one—not even pastors and overseers in the church—should exercise discernment and discipline in the body of Christ. Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount about not judging do not amount to a simple, absolute command. What he says is this: "Judge not that you be not judged." He then explains what he means: "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged and the measure you give will be the measure you get." He goes on to direct his listeners to first judge themselves: "First take the log out of your own eye and then you will be able be able to see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." Clearly, all judging is not ruled out—only a certain kind of judging. You must start with yourselves, and then only judge in such a way that first you judge yourselves and then judge others in the way you'd want others to judge you. In fact, Jesus' words at that moment are words of judgment—he is discriminating between those who judge wrongly and those who judge rightly. Jesus words are always a judgment in the sense that they call for discernment and decision. His words sort things out—they shed light into darkness so we can see what is what. Right judgment always involves love and truth and starts with ourselves individually and as a church.

Though many note that Jesus did not condemn the woman caught in adultery, what is often missed is Jesus' words of judgment spoken to the threatening elders: "Let him who has no sin cast the first stone." Jesus was judging their intentions and so leading them toward repentance—in this case their withdrawal. We should also recall what Jesus said to the woman: "Go and sin no more." Though Jesus judged that her actions were sinful, he gave this admonition with no hint of condemnation. Judgment is not always the same as condemnation. All condemnation is the end result of a process of judgment. But not all judgment leads to condemnation.

We must not assume that judgment means condemnation. In fact, if a right and true judgment-discernment-discrimination is made and received, condemnation is avoided (as in the case of the elders who decided not to stone the woman). Condemnation comes when a good and right judgment, such as God's, is rejected rather than received. While we often judge in order to condemn, Jesus' warnings and judgments are always given in order that those he loves might not experience condemnation.

Love, truth and church discipline

Love without consideration for discerning the truth and what is good, is not love. Pronouncing the truth with no concern for love, which desires the avoidance of final condemnation, is callous and unforgiving. In biblical teaching, love and truth work together (Eph. 4:15, 2; Phil. 1:9-11; 2Thess. 2:10). Love and discernment are both required. This process of discernment and exercising discipline is a derived responsibility of the church under the Word of God (Living and written) and by the Holy Spirit. In this way, the church maintains the kind of unity the Spirit has given to it—a unity that involves the exercise of a kind of diversity that does not undo the unity. It is a kind of unity that does not quench the Spirit's diverse gifts for ministry (Eph. 4:3).

The church, then, is the place where God, by his Spirit, enables and frees his people to enjoy the unity and diversity of the body of Christ under the headship of Jesus its Lord and Savior in its worship and witness.

The church as image of the Trinity

Why does the church of Jesus Christ involve this unique kind of unity and diversity of persons that is the gift of God? It is because the church, as a whole, is to bear witness to the Triune God. For centuries, the Orthodox church has realized that the church is an image or *icon* of the Trinity. It is God's own unity and distinction as one God in three Persons that is the source and pattern for the life of the church. The church's unity and diversity are to reflect and bear witness in an earthly way that points to the nature of the Trinity. This is a crucial way in which the church gives glory to God. Its love involves a unity in personal diversity that mirrors God's tri-personal being—a fellowship and communion of holy love shared by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 9

ORDER AND STRUCTURE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

In Part 8 we looked at the unity and diversity of gifts and ministry in the body of Christ. As the Holy Spirit gifts the church for ministry as he desires, an order or structure arises so that there is harmony in the exercise of those gifts. This order and structure must always be subordinated to Jesus, the living Lord and head of the church, meaning that it will exhibit Christ's own purposes and his kind of love and care for all. It will also echo or mirror something of Christ's own ministry as Prophet, Priest, King and Apostle. Therefore, the order and structure of the church, which is the focus of this part of the essay on the church and its ministry, will not strictly be a hierarchy of power or privilege, but neither will it be individualistically free-form.

Patterns and principles

In the New Testament we find *patterns* of order and structure in the church, reflecting the giftings of the Holy Spirit. Though a single form of church governance is not specified, we find descriptive lists of those who serve in certain ways and descriptions of their responsibilities and practices. These lists and descriptions show that there is to be a certain order and structure of relationship within the body of Christ. Though more than one pattern may emerge in various churches or denominations as they apply these Scriptural examples and instructions, the underlying *principles* will be roughly the same. Any uniformity that may be required of any given church and its members beyond these principles will be of a pragmatic sort for the sake of fellowship and cooperation within a given church or denomination (such as our own, Grace Communion International).

A ministry of all members

In the New Testament we learn that the Spirit has given *every member* of the church a part and place in the ministry (service) of Jesus in and through the church. In that sense, *all are ministers*—all are called to serve. The New Testament uses two key words to indicate this service: *diakonos* (deacon) and *doulos* (servant). In one sense, every member is a deacon (servant) called to minister to God in and through worship. This worship is a dynamic relationship with God, through Christ, in the Spirit—a life of worship that is one of *union and communion with God*.

Thus we understand that the whole body of Christ is a priesthood—a people who worship and enable others to know and worship God through Christ and thereby come to fulfill their humanity. No one person, or even one group of persons, are properly priests (in that sense). The church as a whole (all its members) is called to participate in Christ's ongoing mediatorial ministry by the Spirit, with the primary service of the members in this ministry being that of worship. Through worship, the members serve the Lord and one another and then reach out to invite others to join in that worship. In these ministries of worship there must be coordination and cooperation of the members, and so the need for a certain organizational structure.

Foundational ministry offices

Though all members of the body are called to ministry (service) in a general sense, some are placed by the Spirit in the church in such a way that they can be said to have "foundational ministries"—ones contributing to the order and structure of the body. Those who are gifted for foundational ministries are

given several designations in the New Testament, though no final, exactly repeated list of such designations is found, nor is there a prescription as to how these ministry offices are to be ordered. Nevertheless, there is an order, as seen in these passages of Scripture:

> Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. (1 Cor. 12:27-28)
>
> Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. (Eph. 4:11-14)

The responsibility of those serving in these foundational ministry offices is to attend to the health and upbuilding in love of Christ's body to bring about unity of the faith and maturity, and to guard against false and misleading doctrine. Note how these offices are related directly to the Word of God: *apostles* provide the normative word of the gospel of Jesus Christ, *prophets* deal more with the current application of the gospel for a particular situation, *teachers* help new believers grow in their understanding of the apostolic teaching, and *evangelists* are sent out to announce the gospel to people who have not yet heard or embraced it, and are not near a local congregation. *Pastors-teachers* (shepherds) are then called to guide and care for the members of the church, perhaps in more individualized ways, but still according to the word of God (the gospel). That, by the way, is why biblical knowledge and theological understanding and communication ability are central to the gifting and training of effective pastor-teachers.

These foundational ministries, provided by the Spirit to the church, align with and serve the nature and design of the church, which is born of the Word of God, both Living (Jesus Christ) and written (Holy Scripture). The apostles and prophets are part of the foundation of the church, with Christ being the foundation's "chief cornerstone," setting its alignment and providing its strength. We thus find in the New Testament an ordering (structure) of what might be called foundational leadership offices within the body of Christ.

For the sake of the church and its multiple ministries

The foundational ministries and their leaders exist for the sake of the other ministries of the church. We might think of the relationship between these types of ministry as an upside-down pyramid with the fewer foundational ministries located at the base with the other "super-structural" ministries resting on that foundation. Or perhaps we might think of the relationship as a circular orbit with the fewer foundational ministries at the center serving the other ministries that orbit around that center.

In addition to there being no definitive listing of the foundational ministries in the New Testament, the pattern or order and structure we find related to those ministries is rather sketchy, though we do have in Luke and Paul's writings limited instruction concerning elders-presbyters, overseers-bishops and deacons. Because this instruction does not prescribe one system of governance, a range of church

polities developed over time. However, these instructions include principles and patterns that can and should inform the governance of all churches.

Leitourgia (a dual, representative ministry)

In addressing the various roles of service (ministry) within the church, in addition to the words *diakonos* and *doulos*, the New Testament uses the word *leitourgia* and its cognates (Rom. 15:27; 2 Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:17, 25, 30; Heb. 1:7, 14; 8:2, 6; 9:21; 10:11). *Leitourgia* is translated as service or ministry, with the noun (*leitourgos*) translated as "minister of worship." This provides the basis for our English word *liturgy* (meaning "order of worship"). *Leitourgia* seems to most directly bring out the aspects of Christ's ministry of leadership within the church—what we refer to in this essay at the "foundational ministries."

Leitourgia came into the vocabulary of the church because it originally meant someone who, at their own expense (and thus freely), served or benefitted people on behalf of another person they represented. As you will recall, Christ's ministry is a dual representational one—he ministers the things of God to us (representing God) and ministers our responses to God (representing humankind). This is why Jesus is called the one *mediator* between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). He also is called the one true Worship Leader (*Leitourgos*), the mediator of a new covenant (Heb. 8:2, 6). Thus it is not surprising that ministry given freely in Christ's name would be called *leitourgia.*

The word *leitourgia,* which speaks generally of the representational nature of all ministry, directly connects ministry to worship—leading others to minister to or serve God through Jesus Christ in worship. Note that worship is first a ministry *to* God—a service in which, by the grace of God, those ministering have first turned to God, the Object and Subject of our worship, to receive the gifts of revelation and of reconciliation from the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. Then, moved by the reception of those gifts of grace, these worshippers offer their responses of faith, hope, love and repentance in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father. This is our preparation for participation in Christ's ministry, as we assist others to participate in what we have received and responded to as forgiven sinners who stand in the same need of God's manifold grace, just as do all those to whom we minister.

Being prepared by grace, the *leitourgos* turns toward the people to participate in Christ's own ministry by the Spirit, sharing with others what God is giving to all—what they have first received. This is the pattern we see in Paul's epistles regarding the Lord's Supper (Communion): "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered unto you…" (1 Cor. 11:23 ESV). The ministers serving Communion minister to the congregation the gifts of God, proclaiming Jesus Christ as the Son of God and offering his word of forgiveness and the declaration of our reconciliation, justification, sanctification, and hope for glorification, all complete in Christ (Col. 2:9-10). Such proclamation is made, of course, according to Christ's Word and saving work. This is the first movement of ministry as a service of worship to God, faithfully ministering the gifts of God to the people of God as one of Christ's witnesses or representatives.

Having received from God through Christ and by the Spirit his gifts of grace (revelation and reconciliation), standing among the congregation, as one of them, the *leitourgos* then turns toward God, as it were, assisting or leading others in their corporate response to God. By making those responses, they share in Christ's response made for them. Such responses take the forms of praise, adoration,

confession of faith, confession of sin, thanksgiving, testimony, song and prayer. These responses are made as they are graciously moved by the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father. As worship leader, the *leitourgos* thereby participates in Christ's dual representational ministry, but now in a movement of response from the people to God, as one of them (Heb. 2:11-13). They do no ministry in their own name, but in the name of our one true worship leader, Jesus Christ, who ministers in our place, on our behalf, as one of us.

All Christian ministry has this same basic form—all who minister serve others not in their own name, but in the name of the one whom they represent. Those who minister always serve others as a representative of Jesus Christ, on his behalf and according to his will. By word and deed, we serve to make God in Christ known and to assist others in making their response to God, their Lord and Savior as they come to know him in the proclamation of his gospel. In prayer, we may represent others to God by making intercessions on their behalf. In both cases, we do not represent ourselves, but we freely represent Christ in his dual ministry from God to us and from ourselves in response to him. That is the core of Christian ministry as a participation and fellowship with Christ in his continuing ministry as our great worship leader.

Those who serve in the church, especially in foundational ministries, are first of all engaged in the ministry of *leitourgia*—leading or taking initiative to direct attention to the revelation and reconciliation of Jesus Christ according to his Word and assisting others in making a response to him. This dual representational ministry is first about loving God for who he is (with all we are and have), then enabling others to join in, just as did the first apostles.

Elders

Some members, who first are servants (deacons), are called to serve in the foundational ministries in certain ways and with certain qualifications. In the New Testament these servants are designated as *presbyters (presbuteroi* in Greek). These are formally what we call *elders* (another translation of the same Greek word) and also leaders. Note that these elders-leaders serve most fundamentally as deacons—servants of Christ, who first serves them. Elders-leaders are, then, first followers of Christ and his apostles, just like the apostle Paul, who wrote, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). There is no leadership in the church except by those who first are followers.

Being an elder is not a way to secure importance or identity, nor a way to make up for a deficient past or to prove one's importance. It is not a position where the person gets to run their own "business" and so to things their own way. No one has a right to leadership of that sort. Serving as an elder is a gift and calling from God—one recognized and confirmed by others in the church. No elder can ever be self-appointed. Not even Jesus appointed himself, but was appointed, elected and anointed by God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Representational ministry intrinsically cannot arise by self-appointment—it is a gift of grace to be received. Being an elder is a matter of being an unworthy servant who first serves Jesus Christ and who receives his/her identity from belonging to Christ, receiving it from Christ as an undeserved gift of grace. Leadership is not a place to justify one's self. In Christ, all self-justification has been put to death on the cross.

An elder-leader has no authority except that given through being commissioned to represent Christ and by sharing in Christ's authority. The exercise of that authority ought to look, smell, taste, sound and feel like Christ's authority. The one serving others in his name will always be aware that they never have or

possess that authority. Eldership is a *representative* office. Being an elder who serves Jesus Christ rules out any form of lording it over others (Mark 10:42-44). Not even Jesus lorded it over his disciples! This is why it is wise for there to be a group of elders in each congregation who help each other avoid domination and any other form of abuse. A group of elders then organizes the local congregation around the Word of God for worship and witness (mission). In doing so, they coordinate the efforts and gifts of all the members and are charged with equipping those members for their work of ministry. They also are to discern, encourage and guide other potential elders and eventually confirm God's calling some to join them as fellow elders.

Lead pastors

Among the elders (presbyters) in a local church, one was called to lead the elders as the *episkopos* (meaning *overseer*). Drawn from the group of elders, the overseer was most often appointed by other shepherds. Early on, overseers were sometimes called bishops (a term later used to refer to the overseer of multiple congregations). In Ephesians 4:11, Paul seems to be referring to the office of *episkopos* in his use of the term "pastors and teachers" (pastors translating the Greek word *poimenos,* which is literally "shepherd"). In GCI, we refer to overseers as "lead pastors" (or sometimes "senior pastors").

Given earlier patterns of synagogue life, and based on what is described in the New Testament and in other early church writings, it seems that overseers typically worked with and through a group (council) of elders (presbyters). Together, these elders were responsible for organizing the worship of the church (including baptism and the Lord's Supper), appointing other elders, pastors, teachers and evangelists. All this work was centered on and in the service of Jesus Christ, the one Apostle and High Priest, Lord, Prophet, Priest and King and Shepherd of the Sheep (John 10:11; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25).

The calling of elders and lead pastors

In GCI, with affirmation of other elders, the denomination approves the ordination of all elders, and then appoints one elder within each congregation to serve as its lead pastor to exercise oversight primarily through the teaching of the apostolic message (the gospel). The lead pastor (overseer) thus feeds and protects the flock with the Word of God, with Christ the living cornerstone and on the foundation of apostolic teaching.

In the New Testament, the office of elder-leader was discerned and passed on to others in the church in an ordered or structured way. We see this in Paul's relationship with Timothy, Priscilla and Aquila, Silas and Titus and others. In Acts it is mentioned that Paul appointed elders to serve within the congregations he started. We see here a hierarchy of spiritual authority and maturity. None of these elders were self-appointed, or elected by popular vote. There was a faithful handing on of authority as the Holy Spirit coordinated the various "parts" of the body of Christ, with other elders/pastors confirming the Spirit's working and leading.

Appointment as elder was not made solely on the basis of an individual's own sense of calling, but by an apostle or a council of elders who had discerned in certain individuals a living and vital relationship with Jesus Christ and a ready submission to the apostolic teaching learned directly from them or, later on, preserved in Scripture. Such devotion to the Living and written Word of God had, by the Holy Spirit, developed in them a spiritual maturity and wisdom that was discernable. An individual's sense of call

was always confirmed by other leaders in the church, often involving prayer and worship. Even the apostle Paul's unusual call to ministry was eventually confirmed by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9).

Appointment as an elder (which in GCI we refer to as "ordination"), was not the result of a popularity contest or a democratic process. Rather, the ordination of an elder assumed fervent devotion to Jesus and incorporation into his body, the church, normally signified by baptism and regular participation in worship and the Lord's Supper as well as demonstrating familiarity and receptivity to the apostolic witness to Jesus and his way. Paul's letters to Timothy clearly bear out this pattern. We also find in the New Testament descriptions of elder qualifications that involve a growing Christ-like character and spiritual maturity—fruit of a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ and according to Scripture. These qualifications served as essential markers indicating the Spirit's provision of persons prepared to serve in the church's foundational ministries for the welfare of the whole congregation.

In the New Testament (and still today), the purpose or aim of persons serving as elders and as lead pastors (overseers) is to "equip the saints" and "build up" the body (Eph. 4:12 ESV; Eph. 4:16 ESV) so as to "strengthen and encourage" faith, hope and love for God among the members. This aim involves benefitting the common good (1 Cor. 12:7) and edifying and building-up *(oikodome)* the body (see Rom. 14:19; 15:2; 1 Cor. 14:3, 5, 12, 26; 2 Cor. 10:8; Eph. 4:16, 29). Those being called to serve the body in this way are moved by the Spirit to join Jesus in bringing about these aims. God's redemptive work starts with individuals responding to and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The ministry of elders and lead pastors must also be moved and committed to this pattern and priority. If such focused motivation and aims are not demonstrated, then that is a sign that those individuals are not being called to serve as elders or lead pastors, but are likely being called to serve in other ways.

Pastoral priorities

In the New Testament, the core of such pastoral ministry involved leading in simple forms of worship that included reading Scripture, discussion and expounding its meaning (the sermon or meditation on Scripture), prayers and song. Sometimes a collection was taken and included a meal, the *agapē* feast. Such worship involved baptism (on the occasion of those wanting and prepared to be incorporated into the body of Christ) and the celebration of Lord's Supper (Communion, also called the Eucharist).

This service of worship often led to caring for the practical needs of the members and then the needs of others. This can be seen in the development of an organized effort to take care of widows in the church by a specially appointed sub-group of deacons (Acts 6). This development marks the start of the practice of having a formal office of deacon in the church (though, in one sense, as noted above, all members are deacons-servants). Thus the service of worship led to the practical service being given to other members of the body of Christ.

A key element, then, of pastoral ministry along with the elders is to discern needs and giftings and then equip, release and help coordinate all the ministries of all the members of the body of Christ. As Paul writes of those serving in foundational ministry, they do so in order to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12 ESV). In GCI, those who lead these practical ministries of service are appointed to serve as "ministry leaders" (sometimes, in accordance with local custom and preference, referred to as "deacons").

A ministry of guidance

Pastoral ministry includes both teaching patterned after Jesus and his apostles, and serving as an example rather than the exercise of law or power. Those who serve were not to "lord it over" those they were serving. However, such servant ministry does include (in consultation and coordination with others), providing guidance—exercising authority as representatives of Jesus Christ and his apostles.

As seen in Paul's appointment of elders in churches, pastoral leadership includes a continuing followership, demonstrated by being willing to receive from others who are themselves God's appointed servants in his body, especially those recognized faithful servants who have gone before. This is especially clear in the relationship Timothy had with Paul. This is one of the reasons that beyond knowing Scripture, the study of the teachings of others who also stand in the stream of apostolic biblical historical orthodoxy is helpful and even desirable for all involved in pastoral ministry.

Benefitting from and passing on the best of what one has received from others in the body of Christ, contemporary and ancient, demonstrates a cooperative spirit and humility, a teachability, that will foster the same in all the members and bear witness to the faithfulness of God to his church throughout the ages.

Qualifications for elders and lead pastors

The New Testament sets out certain motivational and maturational qualifications for those who serve in these leadership offices within the church. A principal qualification for being an elder is maturity (1 Tim. 3:1-7)—the fruit of participation in the sanctification of Christ and his Spirit, by grace and over time. That is why Paul warned Timothy not to appoint a "recent convert" to the office of elder (1 Tim. 3:6). Spiritual maturity evidenced, over time, by the fruit of the Spirit is essential to all positions of leadership within the body of Christ.

Serving as an elder is not a reward for loyalty or longevity of service, nor is it proof of one's acceptance by God. Full acceptance, forgiveness and new life, which is received at the Lord's Table, is available to all who come to receive it by faith in its Lord. It is the grace of God's calling that places persons in particular roles of service within the body of Christ. Serving as a leader (elder, pastor, etc.) is simply a matter of the right ordering of ministry according to maturity and gifting of members in the body under Jesus Christ.

Pastoral leadership is referred to in Scripture as shepherding and even nursing (1 Thess. 2:7; Ezek. 34). Such ministry can include both exhortation and gentle correction. There is a discipline, an order, to pastoral ministry under the living Word. Members of the body should be following those who are following a greater One whom they know and whom they trust. Those leading foundational ministries should thus be trust-worthy. Those following should be able to trust these leaders as ones who are trusting in the One they worship. In extending this trust, the members are following Paul's admonition: "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Leadership involves directing people to the Source of spiritual water, not attempting to make them drink.

Pastoral leaders must focus on the church's deepest needs and thus stay focused on their primary calling, which is to minister through worship and witness in such a way that people are drawn and directed to Jesus Christ and into a worship relationship with him—a relationship of repentance and faith, hope and love for him and through him for the Father and the Holy Spirit. As Christ's representative that love reaches out so others may also receive grace and forgiveness and so be

reconciled to God who is already reconciled to them. As Paul says, we are his "ambassadors"—God making his appeal through us. Since God has reconciled the world to himself, we are to call others to be reconciled to him by the power of the gospel and the ministry of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

Evangelists

There is one more ministry office that Paul indicates as being foundational for the church—the office of *evangelist*. Like pastors, evangelists are gifted by the Spirit to serve as ministers of the Word, but in their case the focus is outward-looking and outward-going. The ministry of an evangelist extends outward, sometimes far beyond the walls of the local congregation, crossing socio-cultural, economic and geographical boundaries.

The evangelist is equipped and motivated to carry the Word to those who have not yet heard or embraced the gospel of Christ, his grace, and coming kingdom. Such people typically do not have a nearby church that can reach them in the course of daily interactions. An evangelist's ministry, in the mind of Paul and after the model and commission of Christ to go into all the world (Matt. 28:16-20), is just as foundational as those who serve as elders and pastors/teachers. They too are to be called and appointed, supported and sent by the corporate body. They too should have essentially the same qualifications as those who serve locally in the other foundational ministries. They too, serve as representatives of Jesus Christ and have a dual and mediatorial ministry in his name and under the authority of his Word, Scripture.

The full, complete vocation of the church involves both serving as a local witness and contributing to Christ's larger, even cosmic, witness or mission. As we see in the book of Acts and throughout the Epistles, such a vision included giving financial contributions to other churches and equipping, sending out and supporting traveling evangelists.

The church's vocation includes exercising its corporate priesthood on behalf of all the world. What God did at Pentecost was not forgotten, nor was Jesus' repetition of his commission before he ascended when he declared: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8 ESV). Behind this commission was the promise of God to Abraham:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:1-3 ESV)

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a *sending God*. Jesus Christ is God's missionary—the Apostle (meaning "sent one"—Heb. 3:1). The first 12 apostles were designated that because they were called, appointed and sent out by Jesus with his authority to share in his outgoing, ongoing ministry. The twelve went out before there were any congregations that worshipped God through Christ. As these first apostles passed away, those who were sent out in a similar way were designated evangelists (*euangelistēs,* meaning proclaimers of the good news, the *evangel).* Like some of the first apostles, the evangelists were presumably prepared, appointed and supported by local congregations and sent to carry out Christ's continuing ministry. The resurrected and ascended Lord had been given all authority in

heaven and on earth and had promised to be with them, wherever they would go, to the ends of the earth, and until the end of this age (Matt. 28:18, 20).

Conclusion

Thus we learn from Scripture that elders and pastors (shepherds/overseers) are focused on the care of the flock, concerned with their spiritual well-being, including their growing worship relationship with God in Christ. Through their ministry, the atoning, reconciling work of Christ (which led to the proclamation of forgiveness in his name) was being received by repentance or confession of sin to God in the name of Jesus. The aim of their leadership (as directly and emphatically declared by Paul) was to bring all to maturity—a maturity expressed as "the obedience that comes from [or 'belongs to'] faith" in Jesus Christ (Rom 1:5; 16:26; Gal. 4:19; Col. 1:28). Such maturity would also be displayed by their demonstrating a new mind and heart that left behind much of their former ways and resulted in some non-conformity to societal expectations and demands around them (Rom. 12:1-3).

This maturity in Christ yields the fruit of an overflowing witness in the local context and involvement in God's global, even cosmic mission. This missional impetus had two primary forms: either through sending evangelists, or being sent out as an evangelist, as what today we refer to as a missionary. Such an expansive witness is essential to the being and vocation of the church.

The church corporate gathers together, sends and is sent out. The two vectors of its life and ministry (inward and outward) should not be put in tension or competition. While the focus of ministry within the local congregation is appropriately on the health, welfare and spiritual growth of the members, it exercises this ministry with the aim of fulfilling its out-reaching, missional vocation. A farmer not only plants seed—he also weeds and waters, always with a view toward a bountiful harvest. God's love reaches down and out and then overflows. So does the ministry of his church, the body of Christ.

Note: GCI's system of governance within the United States, including its ordering of leadership offices, is set out in the *GCI-USA Church Administration Manual.*

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 10

THE CHURCH'S "SENDING MINISTRIES"

In Part 9 of this essay we looked at the order and structure in the life of the church, noting that the members of the church are to live out their relationship with the triune God through the church's two principal ministries: *worship* and *witness.* Working together as representatives of Christ, the members are to conduct these ministries in ways that clearly display to others (both inside and outside the church) the true nature, character, heart, mind and purposes of God.

For this "ministry of all believers" to occur, the church's leaders (referred to in GCI as pastors and ministry leaders), through the church's *foundational ministries,* must focus on equipping the members for living out a life of service to God that is the overflow of a growing, deepening relationship with God, through Christ, in the Spirit. Said another way, all of the church's ministries are to be based on *the indicatives of grace* that remind us of what God in Christ has done, is doing, and will yet do for humanity. All ministry must be built on this sure foundation, deriving its motivation and shape from a living relationship with the God of grace, according to his word.

If we're not careful, ministries that begin with confidence in an active, living, present Lord who works by the Spirit, turn into ministries motivated and shaped by confidence in our own skills, methods, techniques and plans. That should not be—as the body of Christ, we are formed and gifted by the Spirit not to pursue our own desires and plans, but to worship and follow Christ. Ministries of worship, discipleship, outreach, church growth, etc. are good and necessary, but when they take over the central place in our priorities, becoming the objects of our trust and hope, they can easily pull the church away from its primary calling, which is to worship, trust, love, hope in and thus serve Christ. All that the church is and does must point back to Jesus, *the Center of the center*, thus directing believers and non-believers alike to Jesus who, alone, has the words of life.

One way to guard against getting off track is to affirm that the only kind of success we want in the church is that which comes from faithfulness to Christ. This means that the ultimate outcome that we seek in all ministry is seeing people become disciples of Jesus—turning to him, putting their trust and hope in him, and entering a growing, personal relationship with him as their Lord and Savior as members of his body, the church. Said another way, all that we do for God ought to contribute to *knowing him and making him known.*

Andrew Purves, in his book *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, helps us stay on target by reminding us that we do not have our own ministries, no matter what they are. There is only one ministry and it belongs to Jesus. He does not give his ministry away or lend it out. Rather, he graciously and creatively creates a place for us to participate in the various forms of ministry he is doing by the Spirit and according to his word. No ministry belongs to any one individual, one congregation, denomination, or para-church ministry. As disciples of Jesus, our privilege is to participate in his ongoing ministry. That participation must be on Christ's terms, not our own—a participation that is for Christ, for his name's sake. Yes, the recipients of that ministry will benefit—our focus on Christ means they will be served more, not less, since what they really need is Jesus Christ himself, as declared in his word. A personal, life-giving relationship of communion with God through Christ and in the Spirit is the best we have to offer anyone (and everyone). That gift is what the church has to offer the world—doing so is its vocation and calling.

Ministries of witness—sent to the world

In its *worship,* the church gathers around Jesus, the Center of the center, and in its *witness,* the church flows outwardly to the world. Having already in this essay looked at the church's ministries of worship, we'll now look at its ministries of witness—what we'll refer to as its *sending ministries.*

The book of Acts gives us a clear vision of the sending of the church as witnesses to Christ in the world. At the beginning of the book, as Jesus prepares his followers to receive his Holy Spirit in a new and deeper way, he says this: "You shall be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth." Notice the progression from the city they are in, Jerusalem, to the most immediate surrounding area, Judea, to a more distant and culturally and religiously different area, Samaria, and finally to the most distant lands—the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). In all these places there is one goal: be witnesses (pointers) to Jesus Christ as his representatives. This instruction from Jesus, typically regarded as identifying the church's mission, matches Jesus' command (commission) to his apostles:

> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you…. (Matt. 28:19-20 NRSV)

Jesus was God's first missionary—to earth! Now he sends those who belong to him out as well:

> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21 NRSV)

God's love is an outreaching love that extends out to draw people into personal and dynamic fellowship and communion in worship and witness. The missional God calls us, the body of Christ, to share in his mission, so his church is to be missional. As God's own Sent One (Apostle), Jesus Christ gathers us to himself, but he also sends us out as his representatives, his ambassadors. As we go, we do not leave him behind for he goes before us. When we arrive, we find he's already there—at work drawing all people to himself by the Spirit. Our calling is to go and when we arrive to identify what Jesus is doing and join in. Sometimes what he is doing is relatively hidden, at other times it's fairly obvious. Either way, we're called to discern his activity and then participate.

Participating with Christ as we go

As we go and then participate, we are encouraged and emboldened by the twin promises Jesus made in commissioning his followers: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," and "Remember, I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:18, 20 NRSV). We can rely on these promises for Jesus is Lord and Savior over all space and time. "Therefore," he says, "Go." We go by faith in him who has all authority everywhere and who will never forsake us. We get involved in his mission as a matter of the joyful obedience of faith—we get to be involved in the very things he is doing in our world!

As we move out from worship, we are sent to nearby places in the community to those who are not yet incorporated into God's church (*ekklesia*). Sent into neighborhoods, schools, community centers, civic organizations, community service organizations, professional organizations, governmental agencies, and our various work places. In all these places we remember both *who* we are and *whose* we are. We

remain his representatives. Within that commission, there are a wide range of ways we might bear witness to Christ in these various places. We always represent him with our character, which shows forth in all we do. Character brings a quality to doing the ordinary or the extraordinary. From setting up tables and chairs to having integrity and honesty—it shows up in the quality of our service, work and relationships.

Ministry in these varied contexts can involve what some refer to as "the ministry of presence." By being there as those belonging to Christ, we are "on mission" representing him in simple ways. In those places and to those people, we will often have opportunities to speak of Christ. We may have opportunity to organize a prayer group (meeting temporarily with others during a crisis situation or even regularly) or a lunch-time Bible study group. There are many ways to represent Christ on mission to the world in our ordinary "as we go" lives, watching, as we go, for ways the Spirit opens up opportunities to witness to Christ in these places to which we are sent in our communities.

Reaching near

A classic approach taken by the church, which diminished to some extent in the 20th century but is beginning to experience a resurgence, is churches having a "parish mentality"—that is, they view the area surrounding their place of meeting as their primary focus for outreach—their God-given "parish." All those who live and work in their parish are their concern, for all who reside and/or work in that area are regarded as potential members of the congregation. Embracing this parish mentality, the congregation looks for ways to minister to all those within that nearby community. This parish model can be a helpful approach to the congregation's localized missional activity.

Reaching far

The church is also called to reach beyond the immediate community, extending its witness even to "the ends of the earth"—crossing small and even great geographical, social, cultural and political boundaries to take God's word to those who have no nearby church which is bearing witness to Christ so that they too can become part of the body of Christ. When people in these more distant locations are called to Christ a new local congregation can be planted. In this way the church multiplies local congregations that, in turn, grow in worship and witness to the point they become involved in planting additional churches.

In all this missional work, the Holy Spirit is sovereign. We do not make it happen—the fruitfulness does not depend, ultimately, on our commitment and skill (though the Spirit uses them when they are expressions of faith, love and hope). Unless the Holy Spirit has prepared people to receive the witness of the church, our efforts will bring about little spiritual renewal. But where the Spirit directs, we will find some persons ready to receive what we have been sent to offer. We see this pattern in Scripture: the Spirit prevented Paul and others from going to certain locations and then directed them to others. Jesus sent his disciples out "two by two" into various villages where they were to locate a hospitable person—"someone who promotes peace" (Luke 10:6 NIV)—who would welcome them, giving them access to the people of the village. Jesus was thus indicating that things had been prepared by the Spirit for a human witness to Jesus. But Jesus also told them that if no one offered them hospitality (and would not receive them in peace), they were to leave the village and go to the next. The point is this: missional ministry must be directed by the Holy Spirit with the aim of being Christ's faithful representatives so that others may surrender their lives to the one who is their Lord and Savior.

There is no need for a congregation to choose between gathering and sending. It's not either/or—it's both! An established congregation that in its gathering equips its members for worship and witness will become healthy and thus grow because it will be sending out members to invite others in. Note the importance of gathering, which involves nurturing, maturing and equipping the members. Healthy gathering always leads to sending. Consider also that a congregation does not have to be large to send out—particularly into the surrounding community (parish) to be the presence of Christ in that community. In a healthy congregation, most of the members will be connected in one way or another to people who are not yet incorporated into the body of Christ.

Members are not "cogs in a missional machine"

As important as sending is, members are not cogs in a missional machine—they are not mere means to desired ends (evangelism, mission, service). A congregation is not to "use" its members in purely pragmatic ways to get God's work done. Sadly, such misuse of members occurs in some congregations.

While God graciously incorporates us in to what he is doing, he is not a user (abuser) who disregards the health and welfare of his people, the sheep of his pasture. A church that misuses its members misrepresents the one they are often feverishly trying to serve. In doing so, their motive is not faith, hope and love for God, but fear, guilt, anxiety and thinking God has left it all up to us to be "successful," as though God is less dependable than we are. But that is not the case. As Paul said to Timothy, "If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself" (2Tim. 2:13 NRSV). God is not dependent upon us, but it is his joy and intention to involve us, his children, in the saving, reconciling, renewing work he is doing as our heavenly Father.

If we approach mission with a wrong motive, those observing what we are doing will conclude that the God we serve is a task-master—a slave-driver looking for worker-bees instead of a father who involves his children with him in his work. As a result, they will have a hard time seeing God as patient, loving, kind—the one who calls us friends, not slaves. They will have a hard time figuring out what Jesus meant when he said that his yoke is light and his burden is easy. In short, the character of our ministry reflects to others the character of the God we serve. The spiritual and social health of the congregation will be the key factor in others wanting to be equipped and then go out in mission. Indeed, the health and quality of relationships in the congregation will be key to having those who are invited in, to want to visit, explore, stay and eventually become incorporated into the family of God.

The gospel fulfills and offends

What sort of results can we expect when we join in God's mission through Christ and by the Spirit? We find answers in Scripture, where we note that our witness—the proclamation of the gospel—fulfills certain things in people's lives but also offends certain things in a person's life (especially their pride, self-justification, self-centeredness and self-righteousness). The gospel can be a stench of death to some and a sweet-smelling savor to others (2 Cor. 2:16 NRSV). Not all are ready to submit to grace, to receive forgiveness, to come under new management, to bow down to their Lord or Savior. Pride and arrogance will often be obstacles to the grace of God. That's what Jesus found when some rejected what he was freely offering. He healed ten lepers, yet only one came back to give thanks. He prepared his disciples for rejection, telling them about four kinds of soil and how each would react to the planting of the word of God. Different soils would have different yields; in some the crop would fail altogether. Nevertheless,

the disciples were to sow the word, both "in season and out," as Paul told Timothy. The disciples would not be in control of the outcome—that would be the Lord's responsibility.

In our idealism and romanticism, we sometimes think everyone will appreciate a helping hand or a good deed. But that is not true. Some resent being served—they view it as demeaning, even dehumanizing. Some will want to use God as a means to their own ends, like Simon Magus, who wanted to buy the power of the Holy Spirit for his own use. Some are more than happy to take advantage of help and kindness, but when it offends their pride they'll have nothing to do with us or God. Such is the condition of their hard hearts. The Spirit will have to continue to minister to them in ways we cannot before they will be receptive to what we are able to offer. They will have to begin to die to themselves—to admit to God their poverty of spirit. No miracles, no amount of good works will, in and of themselves, bring such repentance about. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was not crucified for being a nice guy who did miracles. His message about God, who he was in relationship to God and his uncovering of the profound nature of our extreme need to be forgiven and be reconciled to God, offended many. Nevertheless, some followed him, but a relative few. It will be the same for those who minister in his name.

The difference between believers and non-believers

The New Testament makes it clear that there is a distinction to be made between one who is believing and who is not. Not all are believing. Not all have been "born from above" (born again). Not all are members incorporated into the body of Christ. Not all are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Not all have received God's forgiveness through repentance. Not all have accepted the reconciliation with God that is theirs in Christ. Not all proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. Not all worship God in spirit and in truth (Jesus Christ being that Truth). Not all are receptive to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and some may be actively resisting the Spirit to the point of proclaiming the Spirit as being evil itself (thus blaspheming, Matt. 12:31). Some are repudiating the atoning sacrifice of Jesus and seeking to destroy the faith of others in Christ and confidence in his saving work. Some love the darkness and hate the light. Some are workers of evil. Scripture gives numerous such warnings, including ones from Jesus concerning resisting the Holy Spirit and refusing to receive him on the basis of who he is and what he has to offer.

The church is given its mission in order to make God's word known and bear testimony to the nature, purpose and character of God, which is revealed in Jesus Christ. We do this to join Jesus as he continues to seek worshippers for the Father who has reconciled the world to himself through Christ. The mission of the church reaches out to the ends of the earth because it is God's intention and desire that all people come to repentance, receiving their forgiveness and beginning to live in personal, dynamic and daily fellowship of faith, hope and love expressed in worship and becoming a member of the body of Christ.

God chooses some so that they will reach out to include all in the saving relationship he offers to all. In doing so, we join with the Spirit of Jesus who works personally, individually and dynamically to work out in each of us what Christ has done for all of us. The Holy Spirit brings to fulfillment in us what the finished work of Christ completed for us—in our place and on our behalf. The Holy Spirit opens closed eyes and softens hard hearts to be receptive to the grace of God freely given. So although the church cannot do the Spirit's work, and certainly cannot get out ahead of the Spirit's ministry, the church does join in with the Spirit of Jesus to see the finished work of Christ fulfilled in others.

This biblical teaching about the difference in responses between individuals prepares us as to what to expect when involved in Christ's continuing ministry by the Spirit. When there is resistance or even rejection, that does not mean we or God are being faithless. Resistance is a normal, though grievous, part of faithful Christian ministry.

So our teaching and patterns of ministry ought to follow the biblical pattern, which calls for making a distinction between believers (those who are believing, receiving and participating—having fellowship with Christ) and non-believers (those who are not having that fellowship). The passages of Scripture alluded to above help us identify the range of possible responses to God's freely-given grace that are provoked by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. By describing, exhorting, commanding, and warning about the nature of our response to the gospel of Jesus and our participation, both the benefits of reception and the dangers of rejection and non-participation are revealed.

If we do not account for this dynamic in our teaching and approach to ministry, much of what is said in the Gospels, Acts and the epistles must be dismissed or neglected. In turn, either our experience of ministry will make no sense and most likely lead to burnout or resentment, or we will be tempted to reconstruct our ministry on some other foundation other than Christ and his word. Our theology and practice of ministry must make room for and make sense of what constitutes so much of the New Testament's new covenant teaching.

Some may be concerned that speaking about a response to God's freely-given grace might be legalistic, or may drive a wedge of hostility or rejection between those who are believing and those who are not. While these are dangers to watch out for, the way to guard against them is not to disregard biblical teaching on the nature of ministry, thus misrepresenting the importance of receptivity and participation involved in living by the Spirit in the life of Christ.

Differing responses to the gospel

The biblical teaching recognizes and addresses these problems, guarding against "works righteousness," or the promotion of alienation or rejection of those who are not yet believing. But it does not do so by denying that our responses to Christ and his gospel make a difference. Instead, Scripture points out there are two opposite directions to move in response to the proclamation Christ and his gospel.

Scripture presents salvation as a *relational reality* that, by the Spirit, involves personal, dynamic, daily interaction. Salvation is not an impersonal, mechanical, cause-effect, automatic, non-relational "thing" nor is it an abstract, general fact. We were created for fellowship, communion, participation—a real relationship with God through Christ and by the Holy Spirit. That is God's intentional, covenantal purpose.

That said, it is a misuse of the idea of the call to participation and the importance of receptivity to Christ and his gospel, to identify exactly who is and who is not participating or who is participating to exactly what degree. That would be to approach participation in legal, mechanical, causal and impersonal ways. That is not its purpose and doing so would amount to a disregard for the larger relational reality of the indicatives of grace. Biblical teaching of those distinctions hold out hope to those who are not yet participating, to warn those who seem to be obviously and persistently resisting participation, to encourage those who have been participating to continue, and to highlight all the benefits of participating as fully as the grace of God enables—not only for the benefits to one's self but to others,

both believers and non-believers (not yet-believers). And more than that, such teaching and patterns of ministry give God the glory for his grace of enabling us, through the Son and by the Spirit, to enter into a personal, dynamic, responsive and loving fellowship and communion with him in a relationship of worship.

How then do we minister?

Given these realities and biblical instructions, how do we minister, recognizing that the gospel calls for a *response* of repentance and faith? Do we preach one way to believers and another to non-believers? No—the gospel remains the same. We proclaim who Jesus is and what he has done for all, and we then indicate the ways to respond appropriately to this good news, namely with repentance, faith, hope and love towards God. As this message is received, the hearer is drawn up into a life in fellowship and communion with Christ where they are transformed by his word and Spirit from the inside-out. They are renewed and regenerated as the Spirit works out in them what Christ has done for them already. This leads to a joyful life of the obedience that comes from (or belongs to) faith, not a works-righteousness (Romans 1:5; 16:26).

Perhaps we can think of it this way: every human is on a slope that goes downward, away from the grace, truth and reality of who God is and what he has done for all. This downward trajectory is the direction of non-participation. But the slope also goes upward toward being in personal fellowship and communion with God on the basis of who he is and who we are in relationship to him. What is important, then, is not where one is located on the slope at any given moment, but the direction one is headed. Believers, by definition, are facing uphill, moving toward the goal of the high calling of Christ, a walk (which often is a struggle) guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Those who are unbelieving are those deliberately and persistently facing downhill and so headed away from Christ, pursuing other aims and ends for their lives, resisting the Spirit.

The New Testament allows that though all believers are faced in the same direction, different ones are at different places on the slope. The degree and speed of uphill progress varies from one believer to another, though all are being drawn in the same direction by the grace of God and no one believer has "arrived."

Given this perspective, the unity and solidarity of the believer with the non-believer is in the constant need we all have for God's forgiving, healing, transforming, amazing grace. Some have put it this way: "We all meet together at the foot of the cross." That's where we all share common ground. God is at work to bring all to repentance and faith because the whole God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is for us, not against us, believer and non-believer alike. No one ever turns towards God in repentance and faith except the Spirit draws them on the basis of the finished earthly ministry of Jesus, sent from the Father. The Spirit draws in order to convert the person, taking up residence (indwelling) in the life of the individual, in a way similar to how Jesus took up residence in his creation by assuming our human nature to himself. No one ever grows up in Christ except by the active grace of the Living Word and the Spirit of God.

While we can never know the exact location of anyone on the slope, we can, with charity and clarity, point out the *way*—the *direction* to go and to not go. The most important indication of facing in the right direction of receptivity and participation is repentance. We find the call to repentance in Jesus' teaching (including the Lord's Prayer) and in the preaching in the book of Acts. Repentance is turning

towards God to receive from him all he freely offers us in Christ. In that turning towards him, one is turning away from what drags us out of a receptive and trusting relationship and fellowship with him. Such turning includes the exercise of a mustard seed's worth of faith (trust), which, itself, is a gift from the Spirit

A Christ-centered and Trinitarian understanding of having our life in Christ means God enables and directs all of us to move in the same direction: to greater faith, hope, love and life-long transformation. God's grace pursues us so that we become incorporated into the body of Christ as his worshipers and witnesses to the gospel. Thus we offer the same message to all—we proclaim to all the indicatives of who Christ is and what he has done for all. Then, on that basis alone, we declare the imperatives of grace to receive this good news. "Since God is for us all in Jesus Christ, therefore receive him, enter into a personal relationship with him, participate, become incorporated, affirm your belonging to him, body and soul. Surrender to him all you are and all you have."

Are words necessary?

Another issue related to a congregation's "sending ministries" is how our participation in the mission of Jesus requires both deeds and words. Unfortunately, these two are sometimes placed at odds in a tug-of-war with some churches and denominations aligning with one and deemphasizing (even ignoring) the other. But the biblical model of witness knows no such dichotomy. To speak is to do (Paul and Silas were thrown into prison for such speaking-doing!). Performing acts of services (doing) without interpreting those acts with words falls short of the biblical model for witness. You'll sometimes hear people quote Francis of Assisi as saying, "Preach the gospel—and if necessary, use words." But research has shown that Francis never said any such thing. In fact, he was widely known for his preaching (sometimes to animals!).

What Scripture shows us is that the words (the word of God) is the root, and the deeds are the fruit. Notice the priority of the word—a priority we should respect and emulate. The word is the basis for the deeds—for the actions of outreach. The word spoken expresses the meaning of the deeds, for no deed interprets itself. Without words, deeds can be interpreted in a whole array of ways. By adding simple words to our deeds, we become transparent and authentic, indicating who and what is behind our deeds.

The word, which is first in priority, is then backed up, corroborated, validated by the deeds (we "walk the walk, not just talk the talk," though both walk and talk are needed). We see this in the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels and the ministry of the early church in the book of Acts and the epistles. There we see that preaching and teaching came first, and then came the deeds and even miracles to confirm the source and truth of the words concerning Jesus that were being proclaimed. Jesus never stopped preaching and teaching. That's what got him crucified! But he would cease doing miracles when there was no receptivity to him or to his word. There was no point to the deeds if his words were being refused. In such instances, Jesus' preaching and teaching were his primary deeds.

Words have priority because much of the good news is about a transcendent reality that cannot be "done." The character and purposes of God and his promises (which are the basis of our hope) cannot be seen—they must be declared and so interpreted. We only know about the internal and eternal relationships in the Trinity because Jesus tells us about them. A witness witnesses to what is not

apparent, revealing through their witness what otherwise is obscure. The offer of a genuine, humble, transparent witness invites receptive humility without which the gospel cannot be heard.

If all we offer people is deeds devoid of words, we may fall prey to an issue Jesus addressed—hungry people seeing our deeds as a solution to their temporary, physical need. Remember these words of admonition and warning from Jesus:

> "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent…. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:26-29 NRSV; John 6:33-35 NRSV)

The deeds of Jesus were signs that pointed to him, leading people to believe in him as the Bread of Life. But some just wanted the "goodies" of God, but not God himself. They wanted the benefits of God but not the Son and word of God. They wanted the gifts but not the Giver. Our priority in outreach, then, must be for our deeds to point to their Source—and we do that most directly by using the words of the gospel to point out the meaning of the sign-deeds that we are doing. While that is not always possible, it must always be the priority in our ministries of witness. The point is not to have people believe that we are a church of good deeds, but that it belongs to Jesus Christ its Lord and Savior.

The word of the gospel of Jesus Christ should always be the priority in our witness (outreach) because some will resent our good deeds. Why? Because those deeds will offend their sense of self-sufficiency. There is no guarantee that deeds will "get through" when words do not. If we think deeds will avoid all offense to the gospel we are mistaken. People did not necessarily believe in Jesus even after the event of his resurrection. The offence of the gospel can never be entirely avoided. We will sometimes experience rejection, just as Jesus, Paul and Peter did. It will be painful, but in our pain we will join Jesus in his suffering, and being longsuffering will be part of our witness to the world.

One word of caution here: to put the priority on the words does not mean that having our actions (deeds) align with our words is unimportant. In fact, it's vitally important. We must not say one thing and then do another. We must not be hypocrites. Proclamation (words) and acts of service (deeds) need to work together in a proper order and structure as the church reaches out in mission.

Guarding the one gospel

When it comes to words, it's important to note that there is a significant backlash against doctrine and teaching in the West. The word *dogmatic* now has only negative connotations for most English speakers. Dogmatic means holding to one's opinion no matter what the facts might be. To be dogmatic is to be stubborn and unreasonable, even irrational. But *dogma* in a Christian context simply means the normative teachings of the church—teaching that the whole church should embrace and hold on to, based on the apostolic writings. That's also what *orthodoxy* means: right belief. Theology is the attempt to summarize and synthesize these norms or foundational beliefs used to inform our understanding of

our faith and the message of the Bible in such a way that it feeds our faith, hope and love for God through Christ.

Jesus, his apostles and other early church leaders affirmed that there were normative teachings that could faithfully point to the truth and reality of who God is and what he intends for his people. The church is given a message that points to the Messenger, and this means that there is the possibility that false teachings will arise and be promoted. That is what we see in Jesus' conflict with the religious leaders of his day, and what the early church experienced and the New Testament writers refer to and warn about numerous times.

The church is charged with remaining faithful to what it has been given and to pass it on to others. Though no one is saved by right doctrine (we worship Christ, not doctrines), there is no place for doctrinal self-righteousness—no excuse for sloppy or erroneous teaching. The biblical charge to teach the faith with accuracy and clarity is directed to those called to lead the foundational ministries of the church.

As signs and pointers to the reality of Christ, true doctrine and theology assist us in enjoying a good and right relationship with God through Christ. C.S. Lewis likened theology to a map which is not the road, terrain, or oceans we traverse, but indicators of these that is vital, especially when traveling somewhere you've never been. While a map can never be a substitute for the reality, it can be vital for a safe and successful interaction with the reality. The more faithful the map to the reality it represents, the better. In our doctrinal and theological teachings we want to pass along the most faithful maps we can. If those maps are found to be inaccurate, we must revise them to more accurately reflect the reality they represent, not conform to some current fashion or whim. The reality our maps must represent is Jesus Christ—the full and final revelation of who God is. Our doctrinal, theological maps must be faithful summaries and syntheses of that revelation so that they point to the same realities the apostles spoke of, and are formulated in ways that aim to bring about the same response to that reality that the first apostles had to Jesus and his word, the gospel.

The New Testament assumes that the church can know and identify faithful and right teaching. The church has a gospel that can be rightly grasped and faithfully passed on. Those leading the foundational ministries and all members of the church should aim to have that same confidence and commitment to be faithful to the apostolic gospel. That does not mean there will not be needed adjustments as we proceed. But because we believe in the faithful provision of the God revealed in Jesus and in his written word, we trust he will lead and correct us in our understanding of that word and enable us to communicate it to others in words as well, with deeds to back them up.

Perhaps it would be good at this point in the essay to review New Testament teaching in regard to leaders of the church knowing and passing on normative teaching and guarding against false and misleading teaching. After Paul met Jesus Christ in person and was personally appointed by him as apostle to the Gentiles, Paul says that there is no other gospel. Against those who claim there is another, Paul says, "Not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7 NRSV). Then to Timothy Paul writes this:

> Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us. (2 Tim. 1:13-14 NRSV)

Paul then goes on to say that there is a core teaching that contributes to faith, hope and love for God on the basis of who he is and what he has done for us, is doing and will do:

> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:14-17 NRSV)

Paul was confident in the effectiveness of this normative teaching, knowing the faithfulness of the God who is its source, and God's faithfulness to provide to his people the persons and gifts needed to enable them to be faithful. Many other passages speak to the importance of sound, faithful teaching (e.g. Col. 2:8; 1 Cor. 4:1; Titus 2:1; 1 Cor. 2:13; Gal.1:12). These passages show that there were (and still are) doctrinal norms and standards for the church that can and should be communicated through the church's teaching and proclamation—both in the church and in the world.

Form and content of the message

One of the factors sometimes overlooked in the church's ministry is the form (style, approach, technique, method, shape) of the gospel proclamation and witness. If the proclamation of the gospel is to be faithful and thus impactful, its form must match (align with) the gospel's content and the character of the one it proclaims. This goes for the form of our worship as well as our witness.

Paul wrestled with this issue because some in his day were attempting to outdo Paul and the original apostles by impressing people in ways that had nothing to do with the gospel. Thus Paul writes to the church in Corinth that was looking for a more "successful" (dynamic, charismatic) leader than Paul (who had been thrown into prison):

> Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:1-6 NRSV)

In similar fashion, Paul wrote this to the Thessalonian believers:

> You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness,

> we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others. (1 Thess. 2:1-6 NRSV)

Most often, it seems, compromising on the form of presentation or method used involves one of two concerns that override the need for congruence of message and method:

1. Not wanting to offend. Wanting to avoid (if not eliminate) offense (or any sort of discomfort or even unfamiliarity), forms and styles are adopted from the surrounding culture. This is done with little to no consideration as to whether the adopted form/style fits with what the church stands for and has to offer the surrounding culture. While there is no need to unnecessarily offend or make people uncomfortable, the church is not in a popularity contest. We cannot serve up the gospel up as a consumer good. We must not offer it by making it appeal to something it does not actually offer (like instant success, wealth or health). There is no room for a "bait and switch" strategy to bring people in on one basis, then try to sell them on the need for forgiveness and the grace of God. The gospel "sells" itself! We have only one thing to offer and it can't be bought for a discount—or at any price. The ways (styles, forms) of presenting the gospel that conform to who and what we are serving pose no problems. But a process of discernment is called for so that our methods/styles/forms do not contradict our message and thus the One whose message it is we proclaim.

2. Wanting success. The other concern that can lead to compromise of the form of ministry is anxiety about success (even survival!). The immediate needs and circumstance, and the anxiety and fear they sometimes engender, can lead to taking short-cuts, using means to uphold the local church so it can continue to exist or become more successful. But if the means used to survive or be successful compromise the message of the gospel, we have undercut ourselves and the result is the survival or success of a less-than-faithful church. Again, the means must match the message and the One we represent. The only way to survive, and the only success we should seek, is the survival and success that comes from faithfulness, not compromise.

Resisting unfaithful compromise will require trusting for the outcome in our present, living and active God by his word and Spirit. But that should not surprise us—that is what the entire Christian life is about. Christian life and ministry take place out of the obedience of faith, hope and love in our living Lord—trusting in his mercy and grace operative among us by his word and Spirit. We share in Christ's ministry—it is not our own. The success of our efforts is always in his capable, trustworthy hands. We can concentrate on resting in that, as we, together, seek to be as faithful as we can.

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 11

GCI'S RENEWAL—UNITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

In this part of the essay we'll look at GCI's renewal, including the reformation of its doctrines, theological foundations and ministry, and how that reformation led to GCI contributing to the unity of the whole body of Christ.

Review of key points

We begin by remembering that the Triune God of love brought his creation into being for the sake of loving fellowship. Created in the image of God, we humans are able to exist in a fellowship of covenant love (*agape*) with our Creator and each other. However, through Adam and Eve (representing all humanity), the power of evil got a foothold in God's good creation, reaching down into the roots of human nature. Foreseeing this tragedy, God began to implement his plan to rescue humanity and bring final judgment upon evil. These goals would be achieved by God working in and through the Son of God incarnate as Jesus Christ, and the subsequent ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through the church.

By assuming human nature through the Incarnation, Jesus (our representative and substitute), submitted perfectly to the judgments of God. By his cross he condemned the evil lodged in human nature and on our behalf received God's gift of reconciliation. We receive all that Christ has done for humanity by participating in the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit. Beginning in Acts, the New Testament tells the story of the church's participation in the Spirit's ministry (and so the mission of God) during the time stretching from Jesus' resurrection-ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' promised return in glory. During this "time between the times" the church is given a down payment (first fruits) of the Spirit so that during this present evil age (when evil has not yet fully passed away and the kingdom is not yet fully manifested) the church can embody signs of the coming fullness of Christ's triumphant reign in a new heaven and new earth.

As the church waits in hope for the age to come, it grows up into Christ, sharing in his glorified humanity. During this time, the Spirit frees and enables the church to worship God, witness to Christ and his coming kingdom, and participate in his mission to take the gospel to the far corners of the earth as God, by the Spirit, draws all people to himself. As God's ambassadors of reconciliation, the church has the privilege of sharing in God's redemptive mission, so that all might be reconciled to God.

In leading the church on this mission, the Spirit works personally, particularly and dynamically and to a large degree mysteriously and unpredictably. The Holy Spirit does not minister in a generalized, predictable, impersonal or generic way. The Spirit meets the church in time and space in the particularities of its social, cultural, economic, political and historical situations. Though consisting of many individuals, congregations and groups of congregations (denominations), the church is essentially one as the apostle Paul notes:

> There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. (Eph. 4:4-5 ESV)

Reformation of GCI's doctrines and theological foundations

With the apostle Paul, GCI acknowledges that the church lives in fellowship with its one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Living Word. It does so in accordance with the written word (Scripture), which has been bequeathed to the church by the apostles and prophets appointed by the Lord.

Christ's working (through the written word and by his one Spirit) sparked within GCI (WCG at the time) a movement of renewal and reformation that began nearly 30 years ago. That movement, which involved radical repentance and change, resulted in significant "pruning" as many people resisted the changes that placed Jesus at *the center of the center,* thus displacing any thought that we somehow "qualify" ourselves for entrance into the kingdom of God. Those remaining with the denomination affirmed the priority of the new covenant in Christ, and the centrality of the person and work of Christ to bring to humanity the unconditioned grace of God. With this renewal of GCI's Christology came a new recognition of the Holy Spirit being the third person of the Trinity. As a result, GCI rejected its previous anti-Trinitarian stance to embrace the historic, orthodox Christian faith.

GCI's reformed doctrines and fundamental theology formed the foundation of GCI's new life in Christ and the basis of its testimony to the grace of God including God's particular work among us by his word and Spirit. This renewal highlighted for GCI the important truth that Jesus is the key to understanding all of Holy Scripture. It also directed us into a personal and dynamic relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

GCI's miraculous renewal amounted to Jesus becoming the center of its belief and practice. Re-centered in this way, GCI ceased being off-center. None of this would have happened had GCI's leaders not been allowed and encouraged to consider Holy Scripture, especially the New Testament, in careful detail and with a proper interpretive approach that matched the nature and purpose of Scripture. Also instrumental in this renewal was consultation with other members (contemporary and ancient) of the body of Christ outside GCI, seeking their understandings of Scripture, doctrines and theology.

GCI's renewal involved repentance (*metanoia*) of mind regarding the nature and character of the triune God and his relationship with human beings. The change of thinking was so significant that GCI's entire doctrinal basis as a church was rewritten as its former doctrinal system (Armstrongism) was abandoned as being aberrant. Though in GCI we know we are not saved by our doctrinal statements or theological orientation, we know well that bad (non-orthodox) doctrines and theology can take us far from a relationship with God that accords with God's own revelation. Therefore we are very careful to evaluate our doctrinal statements and the theological foundations they are built on, embracing what is good and faithful and rejecting what is not. This means that GCI is deeply committed to biblical and theological study and clarity, leading to a theologically grounded expression of its worship and practice. As a result, GCI devotes many of its denominational resources to understanding and teaching sound doctrines and theology. Through its online videos, written articles and a three-part online *40 Days of Discipleship* course, GCI provides ample assistance to all members and others who might be interested.

GCI also provides academic courses through its two institutions of higher education. Ambassador College of Christian Ministry (ACCM) offers a curriculum accessible to all at the undergraduate level and confers a certificate of completion recognized throughout GCI. Grace Communion Seminary (GCS) offers graduate level formal instruction (and currently grants two masters degrees) designed for pastors, other

elders, ministry leaders and denominational administrators-leaders. GCS is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) recognized by the US Department of Education.

That GCI provides these educational institutions is a recognition of the high value GCI places on biblical and theological studies along with pastoral training for the life of its congregations. Though some say that theology is just "head knowledge," GCI is a living witness to the reality that head and heart are not at odds—they mutually contribute to an integrated Christian life, both individually and collectively. Without "head knowledge," GCI would be stuck in the flawed beliefs and practices of its past. In God's economy, love and truth are woven together, not at odds in a tug-of-war. Faithful *theology* leads to *doxology* (praise of God). Rather than detracting from worship, doctrinal expression grounded on faithful theological foundations enriches it.

The testimony of GCI is that faithful biblical studies coupled with careful theological reflection is a spiritual discipline that is essential to the spiritual health of the church and the fulfillment of its purpose. Because we are to love God with all we are: heart, soul, mind and strength, neglecting the life of the mind is a grave error—one that opens the church to misguided and even false teaching. The life of the mind moved and disciplined by a living faith in Jesus Christ and informed by Scripture, yields not intellectual pride, but a growing faith and a humble understanding of the deep mysteries of the grace of our Triune God. This Spirit-led life of the mind helps us better communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in whatever contexts our witness is given.

Leading to communion with the larger body of Christ

GCI's doctrinal and theological renewal and reformation brought it into communion not only with the Triune God, but with other members of the body of Christ both contemporary and ancient. It turned out that "the one true church" had other members—ones GCI (then WCG) formerly refused to acknowledge due to its formerly eccentric doctrines that alienated WCG from the larger body of Christ. GCI now sees that it shares with all the members of the one (whole) body of Christ a common lived faith and corresponding central (core) doctrines.

GCI affirms the faithful testimony to Christ and the God of the Bible given by the Apostle's Creed of the second century, the Nicene Creed of 381, the Chalcedonian Definition of 451, and the Athanasian Creed of the 5th century. These creeds serve as secondary guidelines for GCI preaching, teaching and counseling. That we accept them as doctrinally sound, theologically faithful and spiritually edifying indicates our standing with other orthodox churches and denominations in the stream of historical orthodoxy, which summarizes the apostolic faith that was "once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 1:3). Along with other churches, GCI can be described as biblical, evangelical (focused on Jesus and his gospel) and historically orthodox (believing what the whole church has believed, starting with the first apostles).

Our Christ-centered doctrine

GCI's renewal and reformation took place around *the center of the center* of biblical revelation—Jesus Christ. Our testimony is thus not to ourselves, but to Christ, the center to which we became spiritually reoriented and renewed by the grace of God. A key reminder to us of that center is our *Statement of Beliefs*, which stands as a doctrinal testimony to the renewal of our faith by the Spirit and according to Scripture. This document serves as a practical norm for GCI and for all who might join with us, in that it

directs our attention to the final and unsurpassable written norm (Scripture) given us by the grace of God and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit who, in grace, directed us back to Scripture and in doing so led us to start over again doctrinally.

Our *Statement of Beliefs* enables us to bear a corporate witness in worship and mission in harmonious cooperation throughout GCI. Upon ordination, our elders (most who serve as pastors), are required to accept this practical standard and conduct their ministry in conformity to it. Those who cannot do so may be sincere and legitimate followers of Jesus Christ, but we do not regard them as being called to serve as leaders within GCI.

Our incarnational Trinitarian theology

Having changed individual doctrines, GCI's renewal then spread to the reformation of the theological foundations that undergird its doctrinal statements. The theology we embraced recognized that the central question answered by biblical revelation is the *Who?* question. From beginning to end, the Bible is designed to tell us who God is—revealing his character, nature, mind, heart and purpose so that we might have faith, hope and love for God and enter into true worship in Spirit and in Truth.

The *Who?* question was fully and finally asked and answered, once and for all, by God himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Acknowledging and embracing this truth, GCI's theological foundations became fully Christ-centered, which means they became incarnational and Trinitarian. As a result, we embrace what we refer to as "incarnational Trinitarian theology," holding to a "Trinitarian faith" and "Trinitarian vision" centered on the nature and character of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

To say *incarnational* is a way of affirming that Jesus Christ, born of Mary in Bethlehem, is the eternal Son of God who, without ceasing to be divine, assumed a real and complete human existence—he became incarnate in time and space and in flesh and blood. As *Immanuel* (God with us), Jesus was crucified, raised and ascended for us and our salvation. He is the one who fulfilled for us the old covenant by establishing the new covenant in his flesh and blood (in his human nature and form). The term *incarnational* fills out what we mean by being Christ-centered (along with gospel-focused and thus evangelical).

To say *Trinitarian* is a way of affirming the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, which teaches what Jesus revealed (as recorded and summarized by the apostles), namely that the one God is an eternal communion of divine and holy love among the three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity states that God is one in Being and three in Persons, and that our salvation involves the joint working of all three divine Persons as one Savior God.

United within GCI in doctrine, theology and mission

Though there are limitations among our members due to age, educational background and ability, we believe that all who are called by the Spirit to be in fellowship with GCI will share with us in being biblical, evangelical (Christ and new-covenant centered) and historically orthodox. They will sense that the Spirit, by the written word, has led them to understand that our *Statement of Beliefs* is a faithful and practical norm for grasping the central truth and reality of Scripture and for living in harmony with those already in GCI who affirm and uphold it. They also will feel called to participate with us in ministry and mission on the basis of our doctrines and theology—wanting to pass along to the rest of the body of Christ and to the world, the lessons we have learned and the truths we have come to recognize. There

will be a shared sense that these doctrinal and theological concerns faithfully form the shape and focus of our calling to join together in the renewing ministry of the triune God.

Implications for unity with the larger body of Christ

GCI is committed to seeking unity in the body of Christ, avoiding contributing to theological divisiveness by emphasizing what we have in common—the core of the Christian faith, worship and practice. We thus seek to *major on the majors*—keeping what is less important secondary. The major concerns for us in ministry are those indicated by our *Statement of Beliefs* and the official denominational writings defining our incarnational Trinitarian theological foundations. In that way, we seek to stay focused on teaching and otherwise helping people understand the gospel that tells of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

As we seek unity with other Christians, we do not expect exact agreement with our doctrinal statements, though we do expect that they will affirm the theological foundations upon which are doctrines are built, namely, the biblical basis for what we teach, acknowledging that our core teachings bear witness to the same revealed reality as their statements do, and more particularly that they align with the core teachings of the apostolic faith and worship. Though our doctrinal statements and theirs might differ somewhat at the periphery in terms of what should be included as major or regarded as minor, there should be significant overlap of what is major. We would agree, for example, that what the Apostle's Creed teaches is major, being a faithful summary of the core doctrines of the Christian faith.

However, there will be times when what we and others teach as foundational will not be in agreement. Sometimes those differences will be only ones of emphasis, but at other times the differences will be significant due to the fact that our respective emphases and particular doctrines are grounded on different theological foundations.

In the church today there are teachers, churches, para-church ministries, parts (factions) of denominations, and whole denominations that refer to Jesus yet do not teach the truths contained in historical orthodoxy, including upholding the authority of the Bible in all matters of faith and practice. Due to their heterodox teachings and practices, GCI would have only a limited ability to worship with them or cooperate with them in ministry in significant ways. However, we do not approach them with harsh judgment, arrogance or self-righteousness. Instead, where we corporately discern the possibility of fruitful engagement, we seek dialogue. If after significant interaction and mutual understanding is achieved there remains significant and fundamental disagreement, there may come a time for us to offer a compassionate warning, and there likely will be only limited ways in which we can meaningfully cooperate in ministry.

GCI's denominational leaders and local church pastors have the responsibility to offer such compassionate warnings when false teaching arises within their spheres of responsibility. In giving these warnings, we do not condemn, but hold out in trust the testimony concerning what we have come to believe as a witness for them to consider. In situations where church discipline is called for, it will be exercised in hope, trusting they will someday (if not now) come to see that what we affirm as true to Christian faith and practice is a faithful witness to the God revealed in Jesus Christ according to Scripture. In all cases, we trust that God is at work to bring all to spiritual maturity, to the unity of the faith, and so we do our part to assist in that process.

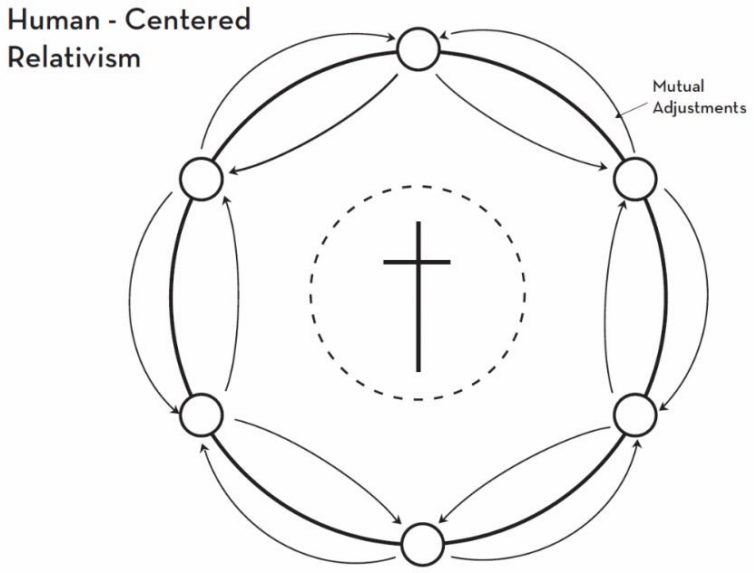
Two very different approaches to church unity

Though GCI is committed to working toward unity in the body of Christ, there is an unhelpful way (called *human-centered relativism*) and a helpful way (called *Christ-centered realism*) to pursue that unity. Let's look at both.

1. *Human-centered relativism*

A currently popular (modern) way of seeking unity is referred to as *human-centered relativism* (diagram 1). It means first dialoging with people with whom we differ, then deciding how much to make mutual adjustments to each other in order to "come together." Doing so involves making certain compromises with the other so as to minimize differences, or, alternatively to ignore the differences or turn what was considered a major concern into a minor one so as to be able to claim some kind of "lowest common denominator" unity. The aim is to achieve some kind of ideal unity through compromise and mutual adjustment, ignoring or devaluing any differences.

Diagram 1



Notes on diagram 1: The large circle in the diagram above represents the whole body of Christ (although it may turn out that there is little to no reason to believe that some we might dialogue with are centered on the biblical revelation of God in Christ according to Scripture at all, and therefore are not meaningfully a part of the body of Christ). The small circles on the circumference represent the various members of the one church. Note how these members are represented as somewhat separated, not only because of organizational or geographical distance, but because of somewhat differing understandings (theories) concerning things like biblical inerrancy, biblical authority, explanations of the Atonement, along with other ethical beliefs and practices.

At the center of the diagram is Jesus Christ (represented by the cross). It is his church, but in this model, he is for the most part sectioned off—remaining at a "deistic distance" (note the dotted line around the cross). This model assumes, wrongly, that we do not have any access to Christ and his Word and Spirit

that can serve sufficiently as a unifying authority. It is likewise assumed that Jesus with his Word and Spirit do not have sufficient reality and objectivity to orient and correct our relative understandings and thus bring unity to his body, the church.

In this model, the only option left is to interact with one another, indicated by the reciprocal arrows between the smaller circles and the lack of arrows indicating interaction with Jesus Christ and his Word and Spirit. As a result, in order to reduce friction and so experience some kind of unity, the only option is to mutually adjust to each other and in doing so move closer to each other on the perimeter. If that option fails, one must either give up or continue to emphasize the differences with each party contending for their own view and thus dismissing the views of others as relative and therefore not binding. Oddly enough, this approach to unity in the end absolutizes one's own foregone conclusions and leads most often to battles of attrition in hopes of wearing down those who disagree, or to making a move toward autonomy (church splits!). These are the unfortunate results of a human-centered (prescriptive) relativism. Such an approach is flawed in foundational theological ways.

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Human-centered relativism typically assumes a kind of *normative relativism* based on several assumptions:

- no one can bear witness to the truth better than anyone else
- the truth or reality to which we would like to have a common witness is not available to us in any way that can bear on our unity
- there is not sufficient reality or objectivity to correct us and provide us significant unity—God's revelation is not sufficient for this

Given the assumptions of this model, doctrinal and ethical positions can be true only for individuals or isolated groups. They have no import or bearing on others. Assuming that we cannot know the truth to a degree that would amount to a free and faithful witness, all we can do is listen to each other and mutually compromise to one another. According to this model, all norms are relative to one another with none more faithful than others to the truth and reality of God and God's revelation.

Though this model is quite prevalent in our day (particularly in the West), it is quite foreign to the New Testament. It represents a false humility, a failure of nerve to faithfully seek the truth and understanding in biblical revelation. It is a gross underestimation of what God can and has done through his Word. Furthermore, it does not produce a unity that informs and guides a common faith, hope and love, and a common ministry. It collapses into a vacuous and content-less relativism or into its own absolutism—declaring that no one has a faithful witness and no one ever can (and not even God can do anything about it!). This is what has been called a *prescriptive relativism*.

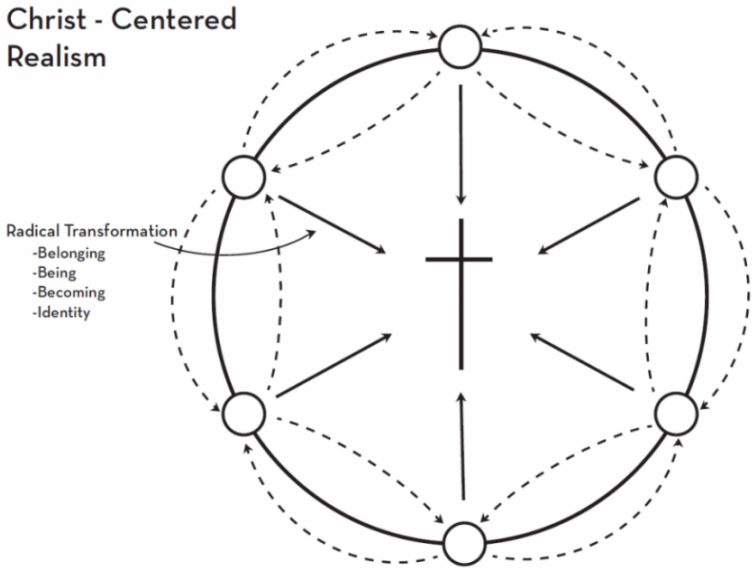
On the basis of this model, those who offer a humble witness to the truth according to God's revelation are dismissed and rejected! This has happened many times in the West, where the limits of humanity overrule the grace of God, and become substitute norms that rule out any real knowledge of God and faithful witness to God and to his ways. Scripture (and the working of the Holy Spirit in, by and through Scripture) is rendered impotent and irrelevant. The so-called *humility of human limitation* has arrogantly dismissed the ability of God to make his voice known—to make himself known! This perspective turns

human humility into an arrogant declaration about what God can and cannot do—into a total, universal, invincible theological declaration and doctrine. This is the height of human arrogance in the guise of modern relativistic humility! This model of unity does not, in fact, operate on the basis God revealed in Jesus Christ according to Scripture as its living center. Rather each individual or group serves as a center to itself and justifies that position by claiming there is no other option and that others who believe there is an option (Christological realism) are deceiving themselves. GCI rejects this model.

2. *Christ-centered realism*

If we reject human-centered relativism, what is left? The answer is *Christ-centered realism* (diagram 2). This model does not mean refusing to listen to and interact with others if and when there are differences. Instead, it means respectfully engaging with those who disagree with us to discover the truth and to bear a more faithful witness to it. This approach is based on the belief and conviction that God and his Word and the working of his Spirit can be accessible and sufficiently objective. This approach assumes that by grace we have access to Jesus Christ by his Word and Spirit, thus providing a reality and objectivity that can inform all the members of the body of Christ, enabling them to become more and more faithful in their doctrines and practices to point to the truth and reality of who Jesus is and who we are in him.

Diagram 2



Notes on diagram 2: Note in this diagram that there is no circle around Jesus Christ that sections him off. Moreover, there are arrows of interaction with Christ and his revelation by the grace of the Spirit. This model does *not* assume that there are no relative factors involved in our coming to see, hear and understand and so believe in Jesus Christ. The small circles on the perimeter (representing congregations and denominations) are still somewhat separated from each other by these relative factors (background, social setting, experience, language, history, geography, etc.), thus there is still a need for the various members to interact with one another. However, their relative positions on the circumference do not have *normative* status—their interactions are relative, not absolute, since they are not attempting to mutually adjust to one another. Thus the arrows between the smaller circles are

dotted. These interactions are for the sake of becoming as faithful as can be in bearing witness to and adjusting to the Center, the Living Lord according to his Word and Spirit. The lines directed to this Center are solid.

This model allows for a *descriptive relativism* but denies a *prescriptive relativism* since there is real contact and interaction with the one who is absolute in every descriptively relative human situation. We are to move "closer" to Christ, in greater conformity to his Word. As we do, we grow closer to one another, just as Paul anticipated:

> The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Eph. 4: 11-16 NRSV)

Because we are at different places on the perimeter, each member may have to adjust in different ways around or towards the center—perhaps moving in opposite directions at time to draw closer to Christ and so gain a more faithful witness to him. One church may be too legalistic. Another may be tipping toward antinomianism. One may be overly emphasizing the gathered community, while another the missional aspects of ministry. One may need to correct their understanding of sexual ethics. Another may need to deal with its preoccupation with materialistic gain. The relative is not denied in this model, but the relative is relative not just to others and their relativities, but to the Absolute—Jesus Christ and his Word and Spirit with whom we have real contact and relationship that can draw us closer to him. As we grow in conformity to him and his ways, we draw closer one to another. In this growth, Jesus Christ serves as the cornerstone of the whole of the church and all of its individual members built on him and the foundation of the apostolic faith.

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Christ-centered realism begins with and proceeds on a fundamental trust that God can deal with human limits and has the motive and capacity to unite us to him so that we might have a common witness to the same God. It embraces the truth that God can (and does) provide a true knowledge of him that brings about a common faith, hope and love for him, enabling his people to have a common witness to the truth of God. Though that truth always exceeds our ability to perfectly describe it, it can (and does) make use of our doctrines and ethical standards.

Through a process of discernment grounded in the objective truth of God, we assist one another to accurately hear and come to some understanding as to the content of that revealed truth. We listen to each other to help us all listen better to the Word of God. We then make adjustments—not to each other, but to the truth as it is in Jesus, who is the Truth. The norm, standard and criterion in this discussion remains at all times the revelation of God that is available to us in his written word, which the Holy Spirit enables us to hear. Thus our unity is sought and established not essentially in our doctrines about Jesus, but by adherence to Jesus himself in accordance with his word (Scripture) and Spirit.

Our respective doctrines will be adjusted and appreciated for how they bear witness to one and the same reality in the same way that Scripture does with final and unsurpassable authority. In this approach there is a recognition that there is but one body, one faith and one Spirit, and we are all called to bear witness to that with our doctrines as best we can. We remain open to the assistance of others, both ancient and contemporary, who aim to do the same thing.

Those who share this approach may experience and bear witness to the actual and real unity that there is in Christ Jesus and find ways to joyfully and freely cooperate even if there is not complete uniformity in doctrinal statements of belief. That is because they share in making Jesus Christ the true, actual and real cornerstone of their faith and practice according to the written witness of the apostles and prophets that Jesus assigned to be his authoritative interpreters.

Conclusion

We understand that God has renewed GCI so that we might participate actively in his mission to the world. Doing so involves bearing witness to that unity with the rest of the body of Christ wherever possible. However, there are obstacles to that unity, and practically speaking, those individuals and denominations that utilize an absolutely relative approach to seeking unity will be of little help to us in achieving that unity. We will pray for them and we are willing to dialogue with them. But we can expect little fruitful collaborative effort in seeking with them the unity found in Jesus Christ according to his self-revelation through the apostolic witness. What we can do is hold out our testimony to what God has done in transforming us as a witness given, trusting that they will one day come to see that there is a far more faithful way to seek the unity of the church of Jesus Christ than mutual adjustment to each other's relative understandings. We leave the result and its timing to the living God.

The whole of the New Testament affirms, and we have learned through often-painful experience, that by the grace of God and through his Word and Spirit, we can have enthusiasm and conviction without arrogance or self-righteousness. That is because we are enthusiastic and have conviction not about ourselves, but about the God revealed in Jesus Christ. It assumes that God can enable his people to have a knowledge of God through his revelation—one that yields life-giving faith, hope and love for God. It also assumes that the unity of the body of Christ is not in ourselves, but in Christ, and that we can contribute to maintaining that unity, which is the gift of the Spirit. We share in the unity of the body of Christ and in the mission of Christ when we pass on what we have received and look to find others who will also pass on what we have given them, just as Paul taught Timothy and Titus to do (2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 1:9). Doing so is GCI's calling—one that involves living in faithful relationship with our Triune God, bearing faithful witness to the whole of the church and in its mission to the world.

The Church and Its Ministry: Part 12 (conclusion)

THE CHURCH AS A FELLOWSHIP IN THE WORD OF GOD

We come now to the final and concluding part of this essay, which has examined the nature and purpose of the church. Because this is a large topic, the essay has focused on several key issues, seeking throughout to build on Jesus, the Living Word of God who is the one foundation and cornerstone of the church (Eph. 2:20). In keeping with that focus, this last part of the essay provides a summary by urging us to stay focused on a particular, foundational truth, then act in accordance with six practical applications of that truth.

A FOUNDATIONAL TRUTH

The foundational truth I propose we stay focused on is one God has been showing GCI through the course of its renewal: The church is a unique creation of the Word of God (both Living and written) and is to be built upon that cornerstone and foundation. Let's unpack this truth a bit. In doing so, I'll summarize some of what we've addressed in this essay already.

First, recall that being a people who belong to God through our Lord Jesus Christ (the Living Word of God) is a unique thing. The Church is a distinctive, one-of-a-kind reality. It is not simply another human organization or social phenomenon like a club, fraternal organization, athletic team, business group, voluntary service organization, school, political organization or nation. As human creations, these institutions can serve the good of humanity to some degree, but the church is the direct creation of God's redemptive work called into being and sustained, directed, corrected and renewed by the Living and written Word of God, illuminated by the direct ministry of the Holy Spirit.

On the basis of that Word (Jesus) and the living relationship it establishes and maintains, the church is given a particular vocation to pursue---one unique in all of history. The church has a divine purpose---a direction or calling from God, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit that it does not and cannot give itself. The church belongs entirely (body and soul) to God through Christ by the Spirit. It lives in the deepest communion possible with the Trinity in this evil age that is passing away. All that the church does is to be the fruit or overflow of that communion, participating with the Living God in his ongoing ministry and mission to the world. In communion and communication with the Word and Spirit, the church is supplied with "every spiritual blessing" (Eph. 1:3) –all it needs to fulfill its earthly vocation.

SIX PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

With this foundational truth in mind, let's now examine six practical applications---ways to live out this truth within the contexts in which we live and minister, both now and into the future.

Application #1

The first application is that ***we must avoid confusing the church with other human organizations or institutions***. The vocation (calling) God has given the church must not be compromised or diluted. The church's focus must be kept clear, its aim never wavering or off-target. The church's one source of its life is Jesus---it lives by his Word and Spirit, and its vocation comes from him and is directed by his voice as our Good Shepherd. The church has no other Lord and Savior, no other source of hope. We must have ears to hear him.

Belonging to Jesus, the church shares his mission and ministry. The nature and task of the church thus cannot be directly compared to any other human configuration, no matter how many forms of overlap there may be. The church has been configured and commissioned for its primary vocation, which is Christ-centered, gospel-focused worship and witness. The church thus does not exist primarily for governance, education, social welfare, marketing, institution building, economic gain, political advancement of society or civilization at large. The church will contribute in a positive way to these other things, but only indirectly, as a byproduct of its primary vocation, which is to know Christ and to make him known.

The church is like light in darkness and salt in a world needing preservation from the ravages of sin. It cannot serve God's intended purposes by losing its saltiness in order to make itself more palatable to the surrounding culture with its worldly aims and goals. Therefore, in GCI we seek first (and primarily) the coming kingdom of God and the ways of its King as we live out our communion with God, by his abundant grace.

Application #2

The second application is that ***we must not judge, control or analyze the church by historical, sociological, anthropological, psychological, economic or political criteria. Instead, we must approach the church and its ministry theologically---looking to our lived relationship with God, mediated by Jesus Christ and his Word as moved by the Spirit.*** A fundamental principle here is that the church answers to one Lord, one faith, one Spirit, one baptism (Eph. 4:4-6). It does not and cannot serve two masters (Luke 16:13). Its ministers must not be distracted by other goals and tasks, but rather make it their aim to satisfy "the one who enlisted them" (2 Tim. 2:3-6; 4:1-5). When other tools, methods or techniques are used to assist the church in its activities, they must be assessed and then used on a sound biblical and theological basis. Failure to do so results in a reductionist understanding of the nature and aim of the church and even of the nature of the obstacles the church faces.

Even when unintended, practices uncritically adopted risk secularizing the church, giving it a merely human center, goal and aim leading to the church being dragged off its foundation and away from its Cornerstone. In order to avoid this risk, a biblically-grounded theology must be kept at the center of the church's beliefs and practices, with no other discipline allowed to take that privileged position, with the church's plans, programs, tools, methods and techniques aligned accordingly. By maintaining this biblical-theological center, the church will be equipped to critically adopt the resources offered by other disciplines, programs, tools, methods, and techniques (including our own!). We will be able to bring them into alignment with our unique vocation as the church called into being by the Word of God and living under his faithful lordship.

Application #3

The third application is that ***we must practice Bible study as a spiritual discipline that nurtures community.*** This application will resonate with many of us because it was in-depth Bible study that was key to GCI's renewal over the years. Through intensive and prayerful Bible study, GCI leaders and members learned a lot, not just about its mistaken doctrines, but about improper approaches to Scripture, including things like proof texting, starting with mistaken theological assumptions, forcing the Bible to answer questions it was never designed or intended to answer, coming to theological conclusions on the basis of long logical (though false) chains of reasons, etc. This new understanding of

and appreciation of Scripture, which resulted in a new biblically-informed, Christ-centered and Trinitarian theological synthesis, was augmented by the judicious use of input from reliable teachers in other denominations and seminaries.

Given this history of Bible study in GCI's renewal, it makes sense that our continuing renewal as a denomination (including the renewal of individual congregations and members) will depend no less on drinking from the same fountain of God's Word. We want, therefore, to place a renewed emphasis in GCI on Bible study as a key spiritual discipline. This means having congregations and denominational programs/publications place high priority on encouraging, equipping and enabling GCI members (as they are able) to read and study Scripture both on their own and in groups. This spiritual discipline is for all, no matter what level of education and/or spiritual maturity they may have.

To help us assess the need for a more comprehensive approach to Bible study within our congregations, here are some questions for pastors and other leaders to ask:

- Is the foundation of my congregation (along with its life and practices) centered on and thus continually fed by the Word of God?
- Do our members (individually and together) have opportunity to listen carefully to the Word of God and to respond appropriately to what they have heard?
- To what extent is biblical illiteracy a problem for our members?

Answering these questions may point to deficiencies and therefore the need to establish Bible study as a core spiritual discipline within the congregation. I call this approach to Bible study a *spiritual discipline* in order to distinguish it from other approaches to Bible study that fail to integrate head and heart, and thus do not yield the freedom of joyful obedience to Christ and formative fellowship with him. Unfortunately, a lot of what passes for Bible study in many churches in our day is speculative, undisciplined, subjective, sentimental, moralistic and even magical. Such approaches do not follow good habits of biblical interpretation, typically taking verses out of context and concluding things without consideration for the genre of the writing, the historical-cultural background to events, and the meaning of words, images and phrases.

In contrast, the approach to Bible study we want to practice is one where members and guests are given opportunity (and training) to listen carefully to the Word of God in its written form and to expect it to contribute to their relationship with the Living Word of God. This type of Bible study arises out of relationship with God and is sustained by God's grace. It is a form of Bible study that involves careful, disciplined listening to the Word of God in order that we hear in it (not so much apart from it) the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Through this approach, we recognize the voice of our Great Shepherd in what we are reading and studying both individually and corporately. We come to find that this Word, through the Spirit, works deeply in us to free us, transform us, and shed light on our lives, congregations and even on God’s grand purposes for all of history (not speculative “prophecy”!). Through this approach we find growing within us our Lord's own peace, joy and love along with hunger for his good and right ways. We find our hearts resonating with Christ’s---what grieves him grieves us, what delights him delights us. We come to know him even in his sorrows, ones borne by our brothers and sisters within the body of Christ and by our non-believing neighbors. But along with those sorrows and the grief they bring, we find the strength of

hope---we come to recognize Christ's presence in our midst and we find ourselves being drawn together around the Living Word, finding him at work in each person and in our relationships with each other. We desire more and more to build one another up and not tear one another down. We find that even church discipline, when and if needed, can be given (and received!) with gentleness, firmness and wisdom. Love and truth begin to work together under our Lord's gracious Word.

Addressing three myths (and other objections) about Bible study

There will, no doubt, be some objections to implementing a comprehensive program of Bible study as a spiritual discipline within our congregations (via worship, preaching and individual and small group study). Some of these objections will likely be based in three long-standing myths regarding Bible study. Let me address (and hopefully dispel) each one:

Myth #1: Bible study only addresses the mind and thus results only in ideas. This is false, for the whole of Scripture, taken together and approached by faith in its author and trust in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, addresses the whole person and the whole body of Christ. In a biblical view of things, the head and heart are vitally linked and are meant to work together. We are called to love God not only with our hearts, but also with our minds (Matt. 22:37). We are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:1-3). Love and knowledge, heart and head, go together in biblical understanding---what feeds one nourishes the other; what fuels one fires the other. If there is a breach between head and heart, God's speaking to us in his Word heals that breach and makes us whole.

Myth #2: Bible study does not contribute to community or fellowship, and can be an impediment to it---fellowship is better achieved in other ways. In answer to this assertion, note that the Word of God, when heard out of real relationship and communion with its Living Center, draws God's people together and nourishes their community and fellowship---their sense of belonging together. Bible study as a spiritual discipline directs and coordinates the working, serving and worshipping of the members of the church together. It binds their hearts in Christ's own love and moves them in love to reach out to others and draw them in. Irenaeus described the Word and the Spirit as the two hands of God graciously and redemptively at work in and among his people. We have seen this happen many times in our fellowship over the years, often to the surprise of those who skeptically joined in. Listening carefully (in a disciplined way) to the Word of God fosters true fellowship---fellowship in the Word.

Myth #3: Bible study is mainly for those who are healthy, not for those with real problems or who are facing debilitating challenges, especially relational or emotional ones. This, too, is false. The Word of God, when studied and heard, in faith, brings healing. That healing, though most often spiritual (involving our personal relationship with God) also involves the healing of our emotions (from trauma, depression, anxiety, fear, anger, resentment, unforgiveness and hopelessness, although skilled counseling will often be needed to address these issues fully). Bible study, when approached in the right way as a spiritual discipline, is not just for brainy people (intellectuals), or left-brained people, or emotionally healthy people. It is not just for the specially gifted, successful or able-bodied. The Word of God is for all! That's exactly what the Reformation, which began 500 years ago, recognized, resulting in Scripture being made more widely available than ever and in the language of the people (with the invention of the printing press giving this initiative a huge boost!). Because God's Word never stands alone, but is graciously accompanied by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, transformation, including spiritual healing, can come about simply from listening (with a mustard seed of faith) to the Word of God in fellowship with others of like faith (a faith the Holy Spirit provides). Indeed, hearing the Word of

God can awaken sleepy minds, invigorate depressed hearts, sooth angry nerves and raise hopeless spirits. But mostly it reveals the heart, mind, will, purpose and true character of God, bringing forth a growing faith, hope and love in the hearers of that Word. Bible study (as a spiritual discipline) thus leads to worship. One's whole life changes when inaccuracies, falsehoods, misrepresentations, and even lies about the nature, character, heart, mind and purpose of God are exposed in the light of God's revelation according to the authority of Scripture. Perhaps all of us at some time have experienced just that! God's Word heals the human spirit and draws us into a safe and secure relationship with the God of the universe, our Lord and Savior. God, who created by speaking his Word, now recreates and redeems by speaking his Word into our lives through Scripture and by his Holy Spirit.

In evaluating these myths (and others) about Bible study, it's important to remember that the God of the Bible is a *speaking God.* From day one of Creation, through Redemption by the incarnate Word of God, through to the Last Day, God, as Thomas Torrance noted, *is an eloquent God*. The Son of God is the Word of God. The Word of God is the Son. The Son is the communication, the speaking of God in Person to us and the Holy Spirit gives breath and life to that Word. "Faith comes by hearing," wrote the apostle Paul (Rom. 10:17). Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy that every human life is nourished, not by bread alone, but by the word of God (Matt. 4:4). God's command to Israel was to "hear" him (Deut. 6:4). The New Testament tells Christians to be "quick to hear" (James 1:19). On several occasions, Jesus said, "Let the one who has ears to hear, hear" (Matt. 11:15). Mary, the mother of Jesus, was one who heard well, responding in faith to God's word through the archangel Gabriel (Luke 1:26-55). Jesus promises that his sheep will hear his voice and recognize it (John 10:27). In that regard, the early church devoted itself to the apostle's teaching, which taught the Word of God accurately (Acts 2:42).

The importance of knowing God according to his Word, both written and Living, cannot be over-emphasized. If our congregations are going to truly be centered on and grounded in that Word, we likely will have to overcome some bad habits of Bible study along with dispelling the misconceptions of these three and other myths concerning Bible study. The best way to do that is not to argue or attempt to convince, but to have people come together around the Word of God and experience what God might do through the spiritual discipline of Bible study that promotes a true listening to the Word of God. The proof, as it were, will be in the pudding.

Note: for assistance in conducting Bible studies, see the appendix at the end of this article.

Application #4

The fourth application of the foundational truth that the church is a unique creation of the Word of God is that ***we must give priority to the Word of God so that it moves and disciplines all our deeds***. Within the church at large, there is an unfortunate tug-of-war between those who want to emphasize words over deeds, or vice versa. This is a mistake, for words and deeds work together. However, it should be understood that the Word (the revelation and instruction of Scripture) is prior to (foundational to) our deeds---our actions are responses to the Word of God spoken and heard; they do not arise in a vacuum. The declarations and promises (indicatives of grace) and commandments (imperatives of grace) of the Word of God not only direct our responses and actions, they free us to act by the power of the Holy Spirit, who is at work in us. By hearing the Word of God illuminated by the Spirit, we are transformed from the inside out. A word not heard or heard superficially, if it leads to any action, will lead to a response made under an external burden at best---it becomes a law that kills. In Scripture, every act or

deed called for, including believing in the Gospel, is based on or has its source in *who God is* and *what God has done* for us as declared in his Word. And that word of Jesus Christ is what gives birth in us to our response of faith in him and his Word---a faith that produces the obedience of faith, not legalism.

Therefore, the Word of God needs to be our daily food. As Jesus regarded it, God's Word (which conveys God's will) was his "meat" (John 4:34, KJV), his sustenance. Jesus did nothing apart from the word of his Father. The Hebrew word for *hearing* also means *obeying.* One who truly hears acts on what they hear. That is what Jesus experienced perfectly every day, and that is what he wants to pass on to us, so that we enjoy being the adopted children of God, sharing in his trusting and obedient fellowship with the Father in the Holy Spirit. As the apostle Paul put it, the only kind of response God wants is "the obedience that comes from faith" (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). As we know, faith is generated by the word of Jesus Christ illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

Some may object here, noting that Scripture tells us not to be *hearers* of the word only, but *doers* also (James 1:22, KJV). True enough, James' emphasis is on doing instead of mere hearing. However, note that James assumes his readers are *already* hearers. He knew that his audience would hear his letter (and those from other apostles) read aloud in church and that they would then discuss what they heard. He knows that most grew up hearing Scripture read and discussed in the synagogue. Thus, James rightly assumes that these Christians have the hearing part well in hand. Apparently, what they lacked, was the follow-through in their actions, and thus his emphasis on their deeds.

Within our congregations, we may have deficits related both to a lack of hearing and a lack of doing. On the hearing side, it may be that some of our members are biblically and theologically illiterate. This is true in many of the churches of the body of Christ in our world. Though many of our members have grown up in a church that emphasizes the Bible and theology, we cannot assume that this knowledge has trickled down to everyone. Legalistic or self-righteous obedience (doing) does not require a deep hearing of the Word of God, but the obedience of faith does. This Word-centered obedience is the only kind of doing that God is interested in for it is the only kind of obedience that is a true response to the grace of God, the mediation of Jesus, and the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Some (many?) of our members (and many people in communities surrounding our churches) have yet to hear deeply, profoundly and comprehensively the Word of God centered in the Living Word, Jesus Christ. Many studies have shown that younger generations do not know the Bible well. Some have shown that the single most repeated request from members of their pastors is to explain the Bible to them. That many who have been related to the church are now abandoning parts of Scripture, with some leaving the church and the Word of God altogether, attest to the problem and the challenge before us.

When one reads the reasons laypersons and even trained pastors and academics give for dismissing all or part of Scripture, it becomes clear that they have a superficial or fragmented view of the written word of God. The arguments they use to justify their rejection indicate a fragmented interpretation of the Bible. In their approach, there is typically no living Center, no interpretive Cornerstone shedding light on the whole. Jesus is disconnected from their understanding of Scripture with the result being that it is misinterpreted and even dismissed. Perhaps Jesus is retained (along with some of his teachings), but that teaching is misinterpreted and held onto apart from the teaching of the apostles Jesus appointed. Some thus split Jesus from his appointed apostles.

This pattern of divide and conquer resembles what so many (most?) cults and false teachers have done since the days of the New Testament. In these cases, assumptions that are alien to a biblical understanding or worldview have colored what little of Scripture is read or assumed to mean. Consider how many misinterpret Jesus' statement that no one should judge anyone and that he didn't (Jesus did not condemn, though he often warned in no uncertain terms!). Or, consider the commonly held misunderstanding that the God of the Old Testament is completely different from the God of the New, or more recently that God the Father was a child abuser who abused his Son, or the misinformed view that Christianity itself makes men (male persons) into gods, justifying their emotional and sexual abuse of women. A misunderstanding of Scripture, as we know, can have terrible consequences!

The only corrective to such wrong ideas is not to avoid the Bible, but to study it properly so that it is understood more accurately. The Word of God, both Living and written, must be the center and foundation of the church corporately and thus of the individual Christian's life. For that to happen, the Word must be the foundation of our preaching, teaching and pastoral counseling. It must also serve as the foundation for our fellowship as a community. Indeed, it should be our goal that our congregations be *fellowships under the Word.* Being drawn to that Word is what draws us together and keeps us together. It feeds our unity and coordinates our diversity, as the Spirit works through, not apart from or uninformed by, that Word.

For our congregations to truly be fellowships under the Word, our preaching must always proclaim the Word of God, assisting our members in understanding the Word leading them to put their faith, hope and love in the God proclaimed by that Word. Also, a good part (the central part, really) of our fellowship must be devoted to the study of Scripture as a spiritual discipline. That study will most likely work out of the center of the four Gospels. As we emphasize the Word in preaching and through Bible study, we will find that God continues to minister to everyone through his Word, bringing to his beloved children light and life, healing and hope.

Application #5

The fifth application is that ***we must deliberately develop good habits of Bible study as a spiritual discipline of communion and communication with God and each other.*** If Bible study is to result in fellowship around the Word of God (both Living and written), we will need to develop some new habits and approaches related to Bible study as a spiritual discipline. In that regard, note these points:

- ***Bible study as a spiritual discipline is essential to a personal relationship with God through his Word.*** Our congregations will need to learn how, together, to listen carefully and in a disciplined way to the Word of God in order to enter more deeply into relationship and communion with the One to whom the Word belongs. A real relationship involves continual personal interaction and exchange: hearing, then responding. A relationship without this ongoing communication is not a relationship. We must learn to listen to our heavenly Father in a deeply personal way. Learning to do so is foundational---there are no shortcuts. There will come no time when we will be finished listening to and interacting with the living and speaking God to whom we are united in the Son by the Spirit.

- ***Bible study as a spiritual discipline involves the whole church and those with special gifts***. God has called and directed the church to listen carefully and in a right way to the Word of God. The unity of the Living God prompts us to see the parts of his Word in the light of the whole of his

Word, and the peripheral elements in terms of the central fact and act of God's revelation in Christ, crucified and resurrected. Bible study, as a spiritual discipline and the fruit of relationship with God, is a group project in which we help each other stay centered on Christ (who is the Center) –hearing the Word of God aright, and taking it to heart. As the church listens carefully, in a disciplined way, to the Word of God, it comes to know God according to his revelation more deeply and securely. It also comes to know others in the fellowship as they see others wrestle with the Word of God and respond to it with their lives. Lives are made whole in God, under his Word. Those listening to the Word of God together will want to listen carefully with the expectation that God is a speaking God who can gently but faithfully lead and guide us as we listen together. Those listening will want to benefit from those who live in daily communion with God and who over the years have become familiar with the whole of the Bible, understood in the light of its Living Center. There will be a growing openness to learn from those specially called to serve the body with particular gifts of understanding and communicating to others how the parts of Scripture fit together around that Living Center. It may be that we will identify some old Bible study habits that need to be left behind and discover new ones that need to be formed---ones that align with the central purpose of Scripture, which is to reveal who God is.

- ***Bible study as a spiritual discipline is a process that a group learns together***. Over time, such groups learn how to study and listen to the Word of God together. This learning is a process---part of learning to be a fellowship under the Word. This process begins in our worship that includes biblical preaching that is theologically informed. It then extends into our individual and small group times of study. Those who come together should prayerfully give it time. Its leaders will be best served if they are well-prepared and supported in this foundational ministry of the body of Christ.

- ***The central question of Bible study as a spiritual discipline is this: "Who are you, Lord?"*** Our central prayer in approaching Bible study should be this: *Show us, Lord, who you really are.* The answer to that prayer should be experienced by all the members together, with each one taking personal responsibility for what they hear and for their responses. Each member of the body of Christ has a personal relationship with the same Lord and Savior whose word we all attend to. We meet both together and individually at the foot of his cross.

- ***Bible study as a spiritual discipline leads to prayer and caring for others***. Further prayers, of course, will flow out of our listening together to the Word as it is heard and taken to heart. There will be a sense of being drawn together with those who are also carefully listening and eager to respond as the Word sets them free. There will arise a growing desire to pray for, serve and care for one another. The result will be a community of fellowship around the Word of God, both Living and written.

- ***Bible study as a spiritual discipline leads to the obedience of faith***. The commands of Scripture, rather than being burdensome obligations externally imposed, will be experienced as light and freeing, having purpose and direction. The obedience of those who are studying together under the Word will flow out of a growing relationship with our Lord, a relationship of faith, hope and love, not of guilt, fear and anxiety. This obedience will be the overflow of our shared fellowship with the Lord and our belonging one to another in him.

- ***Bible study as a spiritual discipline leads to witness, outreach and service***. The Word we hear and respond to together in prayer and worship will overflow in these ways. It cannot be contained any more than joy and thanksgiving can be contained. As we feed together on the Word of God, we will be encouraged, strengthened and moved to share with others not only in the community of faith, but also beyond. New habits of Bible study as a spiritual discipline of communion with God and each other, definitely lead to witness. This witness takes the forms of invigorated evangelism (finding opportunities to share the good news with pre-believers) and missional outreach and service. Disciplined listening will continually remind us of the faithfulness and goodness of God revealed absolutely in Jesus Christ---this good news can't stay bottled up! It wants to overflow, inviting others to join in the celebration. Those who know the goodness and faithfulness of God as presented in Scripture will be better prepared to introduce others to him, that they too might enter into loving and trusting relationship with God under his Word. A notable example of this dynamic is the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well in Sychar (John 4:1-30). In response to the grace of God in Christ, she told the story of her encounter with Jesus to her fellow villagers and then directed them to Jesus, saying, "Come, see a man...." (John 4:29). Many of those who heard her words did just that and believed for themselves. She simply introduced them to Jesus and he took it from there!

Application #6

The sixth application is that ***we must train Bible study leaders who, having overcome bad habits by gaining good habits, will then help others do the same***. GCI and the body of Christ at large are in need of well-trained leaders capable of leading Bible study as a spiritual discipline in the way we've addressed here. Bad habits are often hard to get rid of, and they usually do not disappear automatically. If GCI is to successfully "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12, KJV), it must continue to train key leaders who will then train others to lead people in studying the Bible as a spiritual discipline. This skill is best *caught* rather than *taught---learned* by seeing it modeled; experiencing it in small group settings over a good many hours. Such training cannot be done merely on paper or in a short amount of time. It will perhaps take a full weekend or two for key leaders to get started with follow-up provided (perhaps on-line) with a qualified trainer, for multiple sessions which can serve as preparation for leading a study on a particular passage.

CONCLUSION

The church has the privilege of being involved in the most important ongoing event in all history by being God's ambassadors, announcing that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ. Based in his Word, God can use our witness (in words and deeds) as a way for people to live into that reconciliation, thus entering a deep and personal daily relationship with him, by the Spirit. In short, the church becomes a community under the Word and Spirit whose aim, as we say it in GCI, is "living and sharing the Gospel."

By the Word of God (both Living and written), we come to know and trust God with our whole lives. By that Word we are formed into God's particular people who have been called to make him known. By his Word we become a people of worship and witness, united yet properly diverse. We become more and more a harmonized body, knit together, building itself up in God's kind of love. We can be involved in offering others the greatest gift that there is---God's gift of himself to us in Jesus Christ, who is God's

own Word to us. As God's adopted children, there is no greater privilege than to participate by the Spirit in the "family business" of worship and witness. This is what we were created and redeemed to be and to do. That is what it means to be the church that belongs to Jesus Christ. There is nothing that can make more of a difference in anyone's life than to introduce them to Jesus, the Son and Word of God to us. He alone has the words of life. He alone is the Triune God's Word of Life to us.

APPENDIX

How to Lead Bible Study as a Spiritual Discipline

by Gary and Cathy Deddo

Leading Bible study as a spiritual discipline (as addressed above) involves using approaches and tools that help us listen carefully to the Word of God, then respond appropriately. Careful listening is a vital key. Here are some guidelines:

- Begin with prayer, which helps place us in a position of open hearts and ears, ready to hear what God has for us individually and as a group.
- Read the passage, then ask this: What does this passage tell us about the nature, character, purpose, heart and mind of God? The Bible is meant primarily to answer this question: "Who is God?" The answer is finally revealed in Jesus, who made this question central when he asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" All other questions we may put to the Bible must be secondary (questions like, What?, Why?, How?, Where?, When?). Answers to these secondary questions can be found and properly understood only in the light of who God is and who he has revealed himself to be, ultimately, in Jesus Christ.
- Discovering the answer to this primary question requires carefully listening to what the author of a particular passage is saying to the original audience and how the author is saying it (see more detail below).
- Critical evaluation of what is being studied then comes only *after* the process of careful listening has been completed.

With these points about careful listening in mind, here are additional details to consider:

- We read Scripture with the underlying assumption that its author was deliberate in what he wrote and said, enough for his readers to understand what he intends to convey.
- Our purpose in studying the passage is not to critique or judge what the author says, or to stand over and against him, apart from him. Rather, by means of study, we come alongside the author and let him show us what he sees, knows and believes. We want to see and understand what he grasps and knows and wants to share with us. We stand with him and share with him (as best we can) in his frame of mind, ready to respond as he did to what he came to know and believe.
- It is thus vital that we pay close attention to what the author says and how he says it. As we then move through the passage (better yet, the whole book), it is important to keep in mind all

that we have studied before---to see each new passage in light of the preceding passages in the book. We want to understand everything in context, for the context contributes greatly to accurately hearing what the author has to say.

- We must observe and consider the text to see what questions arise from it, rather than bringing questions with us to the text. We want to interpret what the author says based on our observations of the text before us. We want to understand, as much as possible, the passage being studied on its own before comparing it to other passages.
- Careful listening requires paying attention to how the passage fits into the whole literary unity (paragraph, chapter, book, etc.) and the line of argument or order of presentation. It then pays attention to how the author presents the material (words used, rhetorical devices, verbal tone, etc.), taking into consideration the literary genre the author used to convey the message (parable, letter, gospel, psalm, history, wisdom, apocalyptic, etc.).
- Careful listening takes into consideration the linguistic, social, cultural and historical background of the writing. It will not assume that it was identical to our own, even though we are all equally human and in need of grace. Judicious use of resources created for that purpose will be consulted (Bible background commentaries, Bible dictionaries, Bible atlases, carefully selected commentaries, etc.).
- Careful listening involves seeking to understand the author's intent, aim or purpose in relating to the reader what they have written. What outcome were they looking for? Why did they write what they did?
- The central question to be asked is this: What does this passage tell us about who God is? Also, how does what we see in this passage contribute to the whole portrait of the nature, character, mind, heart and purposes of God, as finally revealed in Jesus Christ? We then (and only then) ask and answer questions that relate the passage to our own lives (i.e. application): What difference would it make if we lived as if what we have heard here is true and real? What can we believe about or trust God for? What can we thank God for? What might we need to repent of? What might we be set free to do? What can we hope for? What have we heard that is good news to share?