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**THEOLOGICAL TENETS OF THE EVANGELISTIC MINISTRY
OF JOHN PIPER DURING THE YEARS 1980-2002**

**A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy**

**by
Shawn Stanton Merithew**

May 2003

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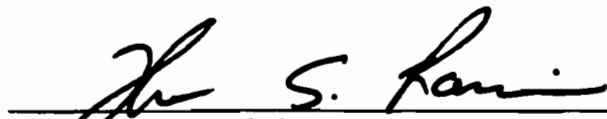
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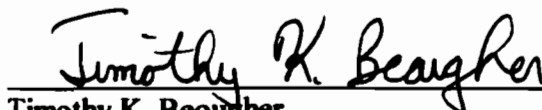
APPROVAL SHEET

**THEOLOGICAL TENETS OF THE EVANGELISTIC MINISTRY
OF JOHN PIPER DURING THE YEARS 1980-2002**

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**THESES Ph.D. .M545t
0199701703829**

**To Laura Lisa Elizabeth Merithew,
the love of my life. My joyful
mission is your lifelong happiness.**

**To Grace Elizabeth and John David,
may you press hard after God.**

**To my parents, thank you for
believing in me.**

**To John Piper, for helping me
more fully realize the pleasures of
God.**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	Bethlehem Baptist Church
BGC	Baptist General Conference
CGM	Church Growth Movement
DGM	Desiring God Ministries
TBI	The Bethlehem Institute
USCWM	The United States Center for World Missions

PREFACE

There was a time in my life when the thought of completing of a Ph.D. was an absolutely ludicrous idea. In light of that fact, the existence of this work testifies solely to the calling, direction, and strength of God. On July 8, 1990, He began His sovereign purpose for my life by changing my heart and making me a part of His awesome work in this world. Then in July of 1993, He called me to the ministry of the Gospel. Since the moment of my salvation, my greatest desire has been to display His grandeur in and through every aspect of my life. Only by His grace have I been able to come to this point. To Him alone be the glory!

The most important person in life after my Lord is my wife, Lisa. She has truly been an inspiration to me in every step we have taken together in ministry. This labor is as much hers as it is mine, for she has traveled this long road with me. She diligently proofread and offered her insights; she helped me to make the time to research and write; and she offered encouragement and love all along the way. Her heart's desire, like mine, is to glorify God in life and in death. She is a wife whose value is beyond expression; she is a gifted and loving mother; and she is my best friend.

Many others have provided prayer and moral support in this endeavor. To my parents, my family, and my in-laws, I want to say thank you for standing along side of Lisa and me as we have sought to follow God in every undertaking. To all of our friends in

ministry and in service to the Lord around the country, we likewise appreciate your prayers. To Carlisle Avenue Baptist Church – the most wonderful church I have ever had the privilege to be a part of – Lisa and I love you all. Thank you for believing in our ministry potential. Thank you for providing a safe place to learn, grow, and lead according to God’s plan for our community. Thank you for allowing us the time and resources to see this project through to its accomplishment.

The guidance and insight of the Southern Seminary Faculty, and especially the Billy Graham School Faculty, deserve prominent mention in this project. Not only have you faithfully trained and prepared me for this project, you have given sincere encouragement along the way. I want to say a particular word of thanks to my supervisory committee, Thom Rainer, Timothy Beougher, and Daniel Akin. These three men, together with Doug Walker and Al Mohler, have been important mentors to me in my seminary training. Thank you for your dedication to see God-called men and women be properly equipped for the work and challenges of ministry.

Finally, I must express my appreciation for John Piper. His passion for God and philosophy of Christian Hedonism changed my perspective of Christianity long before I ever knew him. Though he was uncertain about allowing this work, he never said “no.” As a result, my passion for God and for His glory has grown tremendously during the course of this project. Thank you, Dr. Piper, for pointing the way to the throne room of our Lord and for teaching me to savor His greatness. You are my Jonathan Edwards. “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21).

Shawn Stanton Merithew

Louisville, Kentucky

December 2002

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

American Evangelicalism and Theological Recovery

Consider the preoccupation so many have with finding a church that will “meet their needs,” matched by the feverish attempt of many churches to find out what their “customers” want and then to supply it. And what about the almost wholesale acceptance of the notion that learning how to love ourselves is the key to loving God and others? What the apostle Paul described to Timothy as an essential problem – “in the last days [people] will be lovers of themselves” (2 Timothy 3:1-2) – has come to be seen as the solution. How different this is from the perspective of John Calvin: “Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating Him to scrutinize himself.”¹

Many evangelical churches in our day and age have wandered quite far from the moorings that kept them anchored in the theology of the Protestant Reformation. In a great number of congregations, a firm foundation in doctrinal truth and a God-centered approach to faith and ministry have been traded for the pragmatism of religious marketing. The result is doctrinally anemic churches full of biblically illiterate converts who have little impact on the world because they are virtually indistinguishable from the world. Though they carry the name of Christ, they have in many ways lost their identity as Christians.

One of the unwilling parents of this identity crisis is the Church Growth Movement. The movement began with earnest and well-intended questions about how to break the bonds of traditionalism and keep the church healthy, growing, and relevant to

¹Alistair Begg, *Made for His Pleasure: Ten Benchmarks of a Vital Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 16.

ever-changing cultures. One positive result of the movement is the way it has become the practical conscience of evangelicalism – constantly crying out in the hallowed halls of orthodoxy to remind the church that true faith is expressed by a passion for evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and cross-cultural missions. Accompanying such success, however, has been the negative effect of atheological pragmatism. American pastors and church leaders, responding to the pressures of what was becoming a consumer-driven culture, scrambled to apply the methodologies prescribed by the movement, and in the rush they left behind the biblical foundations. To many, the “what” and “how” of evangelism and church growth became far more important than the “who” and “why.”²

In 1993, John MacArthur Jr. wrote *Ashamed of the Gospel*, a text that became the cornerstone of contemporary works criticizing rampant pragmatism in the church. Responding to texts like George Barna’s *User Friendly Churches*,³ MacArthur points out serious problems with “modern church-growth theory.” He states,

No longer are pastors trained to declare to people what God demands of them. Instead, they are counseled to find out what the people’s demands are, then do whatever is necessary to meet them. . . . The effect of such a philosophy is apparent; more and more people-pleasers fill the pulpits of our churches. Moreover, Scripture is overruled by the marketing plan as the authoritative guide for ministry. One textbook on church marketing contains this statement: “The marketing plan is the

²Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993). The first six chapters of Rainer’s text provide an excellent history of the Church Growth Movement (CGM). Even as the pitfalls of pragmatism are mainly discussed at this point, the reader should understand that this author affirms the great many positive contributions of the CGM (see pp. 66-67 in Rainer’s text). CGM principles have been the impetus behind the recovery and founding of doctrinally strong churches. However, many churches and groups that embraced CGM principles have likewise grown shallow and elevated pragmatism and a man-centered approach to church ministry over the supremacy of God. It is this particular situation that the first section of this chapter is focused upon.

³George Barna, *User Friendly Churches: What Christians Need to Know about the Churches People Love to Go to* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1991).

Bible of the marketing game; everything that happens in the life of the product occurs because the plan wills it.” Applied to church ministry, that means a human strategy – not the Word of God – becomes the fountain of all church activity, and the standard by which ministry is measured.⁴

What are the effects of such a philosophy on the church? MacArthur answers in an almost prophetic manner:

The user-friendly philosophy is a sharp turn down a wrong road for the church. I am convinced that the downgrading of worship, Scripture, and theology will ultimately usher in serious doctrinal compromise. In fact, that may already be happening. Christian leaders who identify themselves as evangelical are beginning to question cardinal doctrines such as hell and human depravity.⁵

Now, almost a decade later, MacArthur’s prediction rings true. This theological downgrade has undoubtedly been one of several factors leading some so-called evangelicals to abandon Christ’s exclusivity and the sovereignty and omniscience of God.

MacArthur has been joined by a host of others who lament the effects of church growth pragmatism. Speaking of Southern Baptists, R. Albert Mohler wrote:

Amidst the cultural shifts outside the church and multiple distractions within, the church has lost sight of its primary responsibility to guard the gospel and pass on its doctrinal commitments from generation to generation. Theology, the pursuit of the true, has been pressed to the margins by the pursuit of the practical, the successful, and even the entertaining.⁶

Os Guinness, in his potent text *Dining with the Devil*, writes, “Today theology is rarely more than marginal in the church-growth movement at the popular level. Discussion of

⁴John MacArthur Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993), 49. In this excerpt, MacArthur is quoting George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 45.

⁵MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 64.

⁶R. Albert Mohler, “Has Theology a Future in the Southern Baptist Convention? Toward a Renewed Theological Framework,” in *Beyond the Impass? Scripture, Interpretation, and Theology in Baptist Life*, ed. Robison B. James and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 94.

the traditional marks of the church is virtually non-existent. Instead, methodology is at the center and in control. The result is a methodology only occasionally in search of a theology.”⁷ The renowned pastor/theologian, James Montgomery Boice, in the last work written before his death, summarized the situation well:

Perhaps the simplest way to say this is that evangelicalism has become *worldly*. This can be demonstrated by comparing it with yesterday’s liberalism. What was once said of liberal churches must now be said of evangelical churches: they seek the world’s wisdom, believe the world’s theology, follow the world’s agenda, and adopt the world’s methods. According to the standards of worldly *wisdom*, the Bible is unable to meet the demands of life in these postmodern times. By itself, God’s Word is insufficient to win people to Christ, promote spiritual growth, provide practical guidance, or transform society. So churches supplement the plain teaching of scripture with entertainment, group therapy, political activism, signs and wonders – anything that promises to appeal to religious consumers.⁸

The answer to this problem of pragmatism is implied in each of the quotations above: theological recovery. Where evangelical churches have drifted from God-centered, biblically-founded ministry, theological roots desperately need to be restored. Much to their credit, there are many persons and forces within the Church Growth Movement that have set forth solid, evangelical theologies. Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner, Kent Hunter, and Thom Rainer represent a number of leaders in the field of church growth that have made significant theological contributions during the past few decades.⁹ However, the existence and continued production of theological treatises from church growth leaders has not been able to prevent rampant pragmatism nor the persistent rush for methodologies among evangelical church leaders. What is needed is a vast movement

⁷Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 26.

⁸James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace: Recovering the Evangelical Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 20.

⁹Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 75.

toward theological recovery that is birthed at the local church level.

Such a movement may already be underway. In a 1995 text, Rainer noted, “An entire new generation of evangelical theologians is calling the church to return to its theological heritage.”¹⁰ In subsequent texts examining the local church, he observed that some of the most successful churches in terms of evangelism, assimilation, and overall church health were those who embraced expository preaching, biblical worship, the centrality of prayer, and clear doctrinal identity.¹¹ A host of other contemporary voices, including prominent pastors, have likewise issued the call to recover the evangelical theological identity. Doctrinal works, commentaries, and manuals for ministry from pastoral thinkers like John MacArthur, James Montgomery Boice, Stephen Olford, Charles Swindoll, Allistair Begg, Mark Dever, and John Piper are raising the theological standard and reclaiming the church from the many idols of pragmatism. The theology and ministry of John Piper is the particular subject of this work.

John Piper: Recovery Theologian

Piper has become a significant voice for orthodox evangelicalism, reformed theology, and missions within the last twenty years, and he likewise laments the condition of modern evangelicalism:

The increasing abandonment of truth and moral absolutes in our culture, as

¹⁰Thom S. Rainer, *Giant Awakenings: Making the Most of Nine Surprising Trends That Can Benefit Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 44.

¹¹The texts generally being referred to here are Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches: Successful Churches Reveal What Works and What Doesn't* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), and Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret of Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999).

militant diversity threatens all firm conviction, has dramatically influenced the evangelical mindset. The political spin doctors who specialize in deflecting attention away from truth onto feelings and relationships and styles have their counterpart in the evangelical tendency to avoid doctrinal disputes by casting issues in terms of demeanor and method rather than truth. Serious disagreements are covered over, while vague language and pragmatic concerns preserve hollow unity at the expense of theological substance and Biblical clarity and power.¹²

His response to the evangelical affliction described above is the recovery of an Edwardsian theological perspective which he calls Christian Hedonism. This unique philosophy has presented to pastors and theologians alike a system of thought that unashamedly centers around the glory and exaltation of God while at the same time addressing man's deepest needs. In one of his most popular texts, he writes,

The greatness and the glory of God are relevant. It does not matter if surveys turn up a list of perceived needs that does not include the supreme greatness of the sovereign God of grace. That is the deepest need. Our people are starving for God. . . . So I am persuaded that the vision of a great God is the linchpin in the life of the church, both in pastoral care and missionary outreach. Our people need to hear God-entranced preaching. They need someone, at least once a week, to lift up his voice and magnify the supremacy of God. They need to behold the whole panorama of his excellencies.¹³

In Piper's approach, God and His nature are central; God is the focus of the church and God is the answer to mankind's deepest questions and needs. To that end, he has led his church, Bethlehem Baptist Church, to define its mission in the following manner: "To spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples."¹⁴

The basis of this system of thought is set forward in Piper's first published

¹²John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 24.

¹³John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 10-11.

¹⁴Bethlehem Baptist Church, "Bethlehem Baptist Church: Our Mission," pamphlet distributed by Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, n.d., cover.

book. *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* is the fruit of a seed that God had planted in his heart while he attended Fuller Theological Seminary in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the introduction to this work, Piper sums up Christian Hedonism with a single word change in a statement from a well-known seventeenth century confession. The original statement reads, “The chief end of man is to glorify God *and* enjoy Him forever.” The goal of Christian Hedonism is to persuade all peoples that “the chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying Him forever.”¹⁵

In the Introduction to *Desiring God*, Piper notes,

Christian Hedonism is a philosophy of life built on the following five convictions:

1. The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful.
2. We should never try to deny or resist our longing to be happy, as though it were a bad impulse. Instead we should seek to intensify this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring satisfaction.
3. The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God. Not from God, but in God.
4. The happiness we find in God reaches its consummation when it is shared with others in the manifold ways of love.
5. To the extent that we try to abandon the pursuit of our own pleasure, we fail to honor God and love people. Or, to put it positively: the pursuit of pleasure is a necessary part of all worship and virtue. That is, *The chief end of man is to glorify God BY enjoying Him forever.*¹⁶

Thus, Christian Hedonism is a philosophy that approaches issues of theology and the Christian life from the perspective of God and man’s ultimate pleasure in the glorification of God. Piper clarifies this central truth with the statement, “God is most glorified in us

¹⁵John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 10th Anniversary Expanded ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 15.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 23.

when we are most satisfied in Him.”¹⁷

As one might guess, such an approach holds significant ramifications for the church. Ministries built exclusively upon marketing or pragmatic approaches rarely use the Bible and theology and most frequently base themselves upon the consumer’s felt needs. Piper’s approach, however, is thoroughly biblical. Rather than following the path of so many evangelicals who place man-centered evangelism first on the church’s list of priorities, Piper focuses first on the awesomeness of God and secondarily on man. He digs deep in the theological mines of orthodoxy and brings forth treasures that cut through the veneer of human understanding and speak directly to man’s greatest need and purpose: God and His glory.

Statement of the Problem

Piper’s theological system has led him to produce over twenty books and publish in excess of a hundred articles ranging from doctrinal works on the nature and sovereignty of God to current issues like church leadership and the Middle-East crisis. At the heart of each has been his passion for the glory of God and the desire for all men to discover their greatest happiness in Jesus Christ. To that end, much of what he has written and preached reflects a tremendous burden for evangelism and missions. As noted earlier, even the stated mission of his church is phrased in a manner that conveys a strong evangelistic imperative: “To spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.”¹⁸ Speaking again of the manner in which people are hungering to see the greatness of God, he notes:

¹⁷Ibid., 50.

¹⁸BBC, “Bethlehem Baptist Church: Our Mission,” cover.

Another illustration of this is the way missions mobilization is happening at our church, and the way it has happened again and again in history. Young people today don't get fired up about denominations and agencies. They get fired up about the greatness of a global God, and about the unstoppable purpose of a sovereign King. The first great missionary said, "We have been given grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith *for the sake of his name* among all the nations" (Rom. 1:5, emphasis added). Missions is for the sake of the name of God. It flows from a love for God's glory and for the honor of his reputation. It is an answer to the prayer, "Hallowed be thy name!"¹⁹

The above quotation is an example of the way that Piper recovers the true nature of evangelism and missions. Evangelism is not merely an activity undertaken by the church for the lost, and it is certainly not pandering to "felt needs" to reach the masses. In fact, man's greatest need is the often "unfelt" need for his Creator. Therefore, true evangelism is about God. It is a passionate calling to lift high His glory and make His name known where it is not. It is primarily done for Him and undoubtedly accomplished by Him.

If such a perspective was embraced by evangelical churches, pragmatism would face a quick demise. Given that fact, and the unique significance of Piper's doctrinal approach, the purpose of this dissertation will be to delineate the theological tenets that undergird the Christian Hedonist's approach to evangelism. More specifically, this work aims to set forth the theological tenets of the evangelistic ministry of Piper during the first twenty-two years of his pastoral ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church (1980 to 2002). In addition to his basic conservative, evangelical presuppositions, there are four theological tenets that drive the evangelistic ministry of John Piper: the sovereignty and supremacy of God, the depraved affections of man, conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist, and the glorifying witness of the church.

¹⁹Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 11.

Methodology, Parameters, and Key Sources

The methodology that will be employed by this work is simple. After addressing Piper's background and the development of his theological system, the four theological tenets will be articulated and delineated in the third chapter. Material for this section will be drawn almost exclusively from Piper's own writings.

In the fourth chapter, the thesis will be proved. Five different aspects of the ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church will be examined to demonstrate how Piper's theological tenets have shaped and driven the evangelistic character of his congregation. The content of Piper's sermons will be examined; the prayer ministry of Bethlehem Baptist will be explored; how the church trains lay-people and ministry candidates for evangelism will be delineated; Bethlehem's local and global outreach programs will be discussed and evangelistic materials used by the church will be analyzed; and the manner in which Piper's writings and materials fulfill an evangelistic purpose outside Bethlehem will be examined. Staff interviews, class materials, outreach brochures, and ministry development documents will play a critical role in proving that the aforementioned theological tenets are indeed the basis for Piper's evangelistic ministry. The final chapter of this work will summarize the findings and conclude by noting the strengths and weaknesses of Piper's theology of evangelism and the manner in which it has shaped the ministry at Bethlehem.

At this point, it is important to note the parameters of this study. First, the intent of this work is not to lift up Bethlehem Baptist Church as a successful evangelistic ministry. While it is a growing church with a solid evangelistic imperative and an incredible sending ministry, it is not one of the largest churches in America, nor is it among the most evangelistically successful ministries in America. It is, however, a church

with firm theological convictions, and the staff of Bethlehem are deeply burdened to see the church become more effective in reaching the lost.²⁰ Second, this work does not seek to exalt Piper as a great evangelist, because by his own admission, he is not. He sees his role primarily as a preacher of the gospel, and he grieves over the fact that he is not more effective in personal evangelism.²¹ Third, while the nature of this project requires it to address the evangelistic methodology developed by Piper and the staff of Bethlehem, the purpose is not to evaluate or critique that methodology extensively. The focus of this work is Piper's theology. Thus, it will concentrate on proving that the four theological tenets given in the thesis define and drive the evangelistic ministries at BBC.

Finally, the reader should understand that three texts in particular will serve as key sources for this work. First, *Desiring God* was Piper's first major work on Christian Hedonism and thus it contains the foundations of much of his thought. A second significant work is one he published in 1991 entitled *The Pleasures of God*. This text likewise sets forth much of his theology, but it does so by focusing upon the fact that God's greatest delight is in being God. These first two texts together delineate much of his unique theological approach. The third book that will figure prominently is *Let the Nations Be Glad*. It is the work wherein Piper exclusively sets forth what he understands as the biblical vision and impetus for world evangelization. With that information in hand,

²⁰A simple reading of the annual reports from Bethlehem Baptist Church supports this fact. Each ministry staff member includes a report from his or her ministry area delineating successes and failures for the preceding year, general plans for the coming year, and long-term goals for their particular ministry areas. Each report from the past several years manifests a strong desire to see their church do better in the area of soul-winning.

²¹John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, interview by author, 14 May 2001, Minneapolis, tape recording.

this dissertation will now turn to discuss the background and evolution of Piper's theology.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND TO PIPER'S THEOLOGICAL SYSTEM

Piper Biography

John Stephen Piper was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on January 11, 1946. Bill and Ruth Piper, his parents, later moved to Greenville, South Carolina, where John and his older sister were raised.¹ The family was Southern Baptist, and their home church in South Carolina was White Oak Baptist Church.² Bill Piper was an itinerant evangelist who spent about two-thirds of every year away from home, yet both he and his wife were very careful to instill strong spiritual values in their children. Piper says of his parents, "Both were strong. Both were bright. Both were kind. Both would kiss me and both would spank me. Both were good with words. Both prayed with fervor and loved the Bible."³

As a result of their godly leadership, John Piper accepted Christ when he was six years old while the family was on vacation in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. He has no memory of the occasion, but his mother said he became very concerned about his salvation

¹"John Piper – Biography" [on-line]; accessed 24 August 2000; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/About_DGM/Piper/Piper.htm; Internet.

²John Piper, "Doing Missions When Dying Is Gain," a sermon delivered 27 October 1996 at Wheaton College, tape recording (Minneapolis: Desiring God Ministries).

³John Piper, *What's the Difference? Manhood and Womanhood Defined according to the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 11-12.

one day on the trip, so she spoke with him and he trusted Christ. He was baptized at age ten at White Oak Baptist Church by his father.⁴ Piper grew up with the abiding love of a devoted family, and his father's vocation did much to shape his life as well. Referring to the day his father would return from his latest campaign, Piper noted, "At the dinner table that night (these were the happiest times in my memory) we would hear about the victories of the gospel. Surely it is more exciting to be the son of an evangelist than to sit with knights and warriors."⁵

Piper attended Wheaton College from 1964 to 1968 where he majored in Literature and minored in Philosophy.⁶ Three very important events took place in his life during this time. First, Wheaton is where he met Noel Henry, the woman he would marry in 1968.⁷ Second, a critical development for his future ministry took place: he overcame a debilitating fear of public speaking. Piper had been terrified of public speaking since elementary school. All through middle and high school, he would take lower grades in classes that required oral reports rather than undergo the agony of speaking in front of people. As Piper was attending summer classes in 1966, the chaplain at Wheaton approached him and asked him to lead in prayer during one of the summer services. Without knowing why, Piper consented. That day, he made a bargain with God. He prayed and told God that if He would get him through this 30 second prayer, he would

⁴John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, phone interview by author, 8 October 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

⁵John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 10th Anniversary Expanded ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1996), 12.

⁶"John Piper – Biography."

⁷Ibid.

never turn down a speaking engagement out of fear again. God honored his request, and Piper has honored his commitment.⁸

The third development took place just a couple months later. In September of 1966, Piper contracted a case of mononucleosis that led to a three week confinement at Wheaton's health center. At the time, Piper was a junior pre-med student majoring in literature. The Fall semester had begun with Spiritual Emphasis Week and the speaker that year was Harold John Ockenga. As Piper listened to those sermons, carried to his bedside by the college radio station, God moved in his heart and called him into the ministry.⁹ Speaking of his call to ministry, Piper wrote,

Under the preaching of the Word by Pastor Ockenga the direction of my life was permanently changed. I can remember my heart almost bursting with longing as I listened – longing to know and handle the Word of God like that. Through those messages God called me to the ministry of the Word, irresistibly and (I believe) irrevocably. . . . When I got out of the health center, I dropped organic chemistry, took up philosophy as a minor, and set my face to get the best biblical and theological education I could.¹⁰

In 1968, Piper went on to Fuller Theological Seminary where he completed a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1971. It was here that he was introduced to two men that were very important in his theological development. The first was the man that he considers his greatest “living” teacher, Daniel Fuller, and the second is his most influential “dead” teacher, Jonathan Edwards.¹¹ Under their influence and through the movement of

⁸Piper, “Doing Missions When Dying Is Gain.”

⁹John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 17.

¹⁰Ibid. Additionally, Piper briefly mentions this episode in *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2002), xv.

¹¹“John Piper – Biography.”

the Holy Spirit, the acorn of Christian Hedonism, planted in his heart as a child, sprouted and began its growth into a mighty oak. This theological development will be treated in the next section.

From 1971 to 1974, Piper resided in Munich, West Germany, where he completed a doctorate in New Testament Studies at the University of Munich. His dissertation was entitled *Love Your Enemies: Jesus' Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and the Early Christian Paraenesis*, now published by Baker Book House.¹² In 1974, Piper traveled to Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he taught biblical studies for six years.¹³ Piper was ordained to the ministry during this tenure at Bethel. In 1975, Daniel Fuller preached his ordination service using Second Kings 7:9 as his text. Speaking of this sermon, Piper compared himself to the lepers in the story:

It (Fuller's sermon) was prophetic. For I have been a leper stumbling again and again onto the banquet of God in the wilderness of this world. And I have discovered that the banquet tastes far sweeter when I eat it with the widows of Samaria than when I hoard it in the desert.¹⁴

Piper published a number of articles over the next few years. As one might expect, they dealt mainly with three key subjects: Christian Hedonism, Jonathan Edwards, and New Testament theology.¹⁵

In 1980, sensing "an irresistible call of the Lord to preach," Piper accepted the

¹²Ibid. His dissertation was published as *Love Your Enemies: Jesus' Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and the Early Christian Paraenesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).

¹³"John Piper – Biography."

¹⁴Piper, *Desiring God*, 239.

¹⁵A review of his bibliography from 1974 through 1980 supports this fact.

pastorate of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.¹⁶ On July 1, 1980, he assumed the role of senior pastor at this historic church. His father, Bill Piper, still an active minister and evangelist at the time, gave the charge at his installation service.¹⁷ Today, over twenty years later, John Piper is still faithfully leading the body of believers at Bethlehem. In the true spirit of his father's charge, he burns with a passion for the glory of God to be manifest through the salvation of lost souls everywhere. That passion for God and for the salvation of sinners is evident through the ministry he has built.

Theological Development

When considering John Piper's development, attention must first turn to his parents. He was raised in a theologically conservative home, and the fundamental Bible knowledge and doctrines his parents instilled in him at a young age provided the foundation for everything he has become. Bill Piper is still actively ministering around the world through international radio and Bible courses,¹⁸ and many of the seeds of John Piper's theological system can be traced back to what he learned from his father. At a banquet in honor of his father's eightieth birthday, Piper gave an address wherein he delineated ten lessons he learned from his father. Four things in particular stand out in that list. The first deals with the sovereignty of God:

Romans 8:28 was as prominent as John 3:16 in our home. I learned it from the lips of my father: God works all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. This laid the foundation for my life. This is the way God is. Life is hard. God is sovereign. God is good. My father

¹⁶“John Piper – Biography.”

¹⁷Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Annual Report: 1980” (Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, January 1981), 7.

¹⁸“John Piper – Biography.”

never murmured at the providence of God, not even when God took my mother at age fifty-six. The loss was immense. The crying was long. But God was never doubted.¹⁹

The second lesson deals with the incredible importance of evangelism:

My father was an evangelist. His traveling absence from two-thirds of my life carried one main message to me: Hell is real and terrible, and Jesus is a great Savior. Mother never hinted that the absence of my father was anything but a glorious privilege for us to support. It never entered into my mind to resent it. Nor does it today.²⁰

The third lesson deals with ultimate satisfaction in Christ:

My father was and is the happiest man I have ever known. In a sermon called "Saved, Safe and Satisfied," he said, "He is God. When you fully trust Him you have all that God is and all that God has. You cannot be otherwise than satisfied with the perfect fulness of Christ." For all the passion of heaven and hell, it was the happiest home I have ever known.²¹

The fourth thing he learned from his father was an important lesson in doctrine:

We were fundamentalists – without the attitude. We had our list of things. But that wasn't the main thing. God was the main thing. And God was worth everything. . . . Bible doctrine is important, but don't beat people up with it. He groaned over schools and grandmothers who split what the Bible holds together: Speak "The truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Truth and love. A good marriage. Keep it together, son.²²

As one can see from the above quotations, Piper was instilled with strong theological foundations. The seeds for Christians Hedonism and Piper's unique approach to evangelism were sown into his life from the time he was born.

Piper's mother was likewise an incredible influence on his life because of her

¹⁹John Piper, *A Godward Life, Book Two* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1999), 37-38.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 38.

²¹*Ibid.*, 38-39.

²²*Ibid.*, 39. This lesson is a combination of two separate but related items in his list of ten things.

strong faith and her love for the Bible. She died in a bus accident in Israel in 1974,²³ and it was a difficult experience for Piper. In the preface to his book *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*, he dedicated the book to her with the following words:

For the last 10 years of her life she wrote to me about once a week, first in Illinois during college, then in California during seminary, then in Germany during graduate school, then in Minnesota as I began my ministry of teaching. She was relentless in her love. Scarcely a letter would be without a quote from the Scriptures. She had saturated me as a boy. She would go on saturating me as a man.²⁴

Much of what Piper has written in the books *What's the Difference?* and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* serves as a tribute to the faith, strength, biblical femininity he saw exemplified in his mother.

Other than experiential anecdotes and his call to ministry, Piper does not mention much in terms of theological development during his college years. He does, however, describe the problem that Christian Hedonism would later solve:

When I was in college I had this vague, pervasive notion that if I did something good because it would make me happy, I'd ruin its goodness. I figured that the goodness of my moral action was lessened to the degree that I was motivated by a desire for my own pleasure. . . . I found in me an overwhelming longing to be happy, a tremendously powerful impulse to seek pleasure, yet at every point of moral decision I said to myself that this impulse should have no influence. . . . One of the most frustrating areas was that of worship and praise. My vague notion that the higher the activity, the less there must be of self-interest in it, caused me to think of worship almost solely in terms of duty. And that tends to cut the heart out of it.²⁵

God's answer to Piper's ideological malady came in the form of two very critical

²³John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995), 6.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵John Piper, "How I Became a Christian Hedonist," *HIS* 37, no. 6 (1977): 3. *HIS* is the old Intervarsity Magazine. It is now out of print, and this author does not know if *HIS* is an acronym or not.

developments during his first semester of seminary. These developments would literally redefine Piper's personal walk with God and his theological perspective. The first was the birth of Christian Hedonism.

During his first semester at Fuller Theological Seminary (1968), Piper was enrolled in Daniel Fuller's hermeneutics class. As he was going through the course syllabus, Piper's attention was caught by the section on apologetics. Fuller's argument in the syllabus was that no one possessed all the time necessary to weigh and investigate all the religions and possible systems of thought present in the world. One must therefore be selective. He continued to argue that all people pursue happiness and that if a system or religion did not hold out the prospect of eternal satisfaction, it was not worth considering. Such an approach narrowed the field to several ideologies which all, in turn, proved insufficient compared to Christianity. Christianity was the only religion that could meet all of man's needs for now and for eternity – it was the only one that offered true happiness.²⁶ Piper states that as he read this section, "Bells went off and lights flashed everywhere."²⁷ It was the excitement of this insight that led him to seek out and explore the works of Blaise Pascal, C. S. Lewis, and Jonathan Edwards. He notes, "In a matter of weeks I came to see that it is unbiblical and arrogant to try to worship God for any other reason than the *pleasure* that is to be had in him."²⁸

Piper notes that theologians like Pascal were early Christian Hedonists because they realized,

²⁶John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, interview by author, 14 May 2001, Minneapolis, tape recording.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Piper, "How I Became a Christian Hedonist," 3.

All men seek happiness without exception. They all aim at this goal however different the means they use to attain it. What makes those go to war and those bide at home is this same desire which both classes cherish, though the point of view varies. The will never makes the smallest move but with this as its goal. It is the motive of all the actions of all men, even of those who contemplate suicide.²⁹

Piper paired this understanding of Pascal's with insights from C. S. Lewis:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.³⁰

Piper then brought these insights to bear on the struggle he had experienced in college:

"All those years I had been trying to suppress my tremendous longing for happiness so that I could honestly praise God out of some 'higher,' less selfish motive. But now it started to dawn that this persistent and undeniable yearning for happiness was not to be suppressed but was to be glutted – on God!"³¹ He continues,

The pleasure that Christian Hedonism seeks is the pleasure which is in God himself. He is the end of our search, not the means to some further end. Our exceeding joy is he, the Lord – not the streets of gold, or the reunion with relatives or any other blessing of heaven. Christian Hedonism does not reduce God to a key that unlocks a treasure chest of gold and silver. Rather it transforms the heart so that "the Almighty will be your gold and choice silver to you" (Job 22:25 NASB).³²

Thus, Piper's contemporary version of Christian Hedonism was born, and it is this perspective that continued to guide his theological development.

²⁹Ibid. Piper is quoting Pascal's 250th *Pensee*.

³⁰Ibid., 4. Piper is quoting C. S. Lewis' sermon "The Weight of Glory."

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 5.

The second critical development that took place during seminary was Piper's espousal of Calvinism. As noted earlier, Piper did grow up in a very "God-centered" home. Speaking of his upbringing, he states,

I believe the seeds were sown for a very high view of God and His sovereignty by my father in the way he prayed with utter confidence in the power of God to meet our needs as a family and cause his mission to triumph in the world. My father used the term "glory of God" as often as any other it seems to my memory. So the foundations were laid for God-centered thinking.³³

Though he grew up in such a theocentric environment, Piper is quick to note that his father was not a Calvinist and still disagrees with his Calvinism to this day. Thus, Piper comments that he "inherited a theoretical Arminianism, that is, a typical evangelical, American free-will understanding of human nature and sin and salvation" that he carried until he began classes at Fuller.³⁴

Once again, Daniel Fuller and Jonathan Edwards would play very key roles in changing Piper's theological views and awakening him to the full sovereignty of God. Reflecting back upon his early months at seminary, Piper wrote,

At Fuller the great change [embracing Calvinism] happened under the influence of Daniel Fuller and James Morgan (a systematic theology teacher who died of stomach cancer while I was there) and Jonathan Edwards. My Calvinism emerged mainly from exegesis, not from reading Calvin or any other systematic theologian. I have always been very oriented on Bible texts and not much impressed with merely logical deductions from broad principles. So Daniel Fuller's very close and rigorous attention to texts in Romans and Galatians together with Jim Morgan's pressing the meaning of Romans 9 plus Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will* turned my world upside down and I became a lover of the sovereignty of God in all things.³⁵

This theological development complemented and coincided with Piper's realization of

³³ John Piper, E-mail correspondence with author, 14 September 2002.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Christian Hedonism. The previous quote continues:

Almost simultaneously I discovered Christian Hedonism with Dan Fuller's and C. S. Lewis' and Jonathan Edwards' help. This was a precious providence because Christian Hedonism is, in my judgement, one of the great ways God is raising up in our day to show many skeptics that Calvinism is not what they think it is. It is in fact the path to everlasting joy and the path that enables one to say now with the apostle Paul, "sorrowful but always rejoicing."³⁶

It is the two complementary theological perspectives of Calvinism and Christian Hedonism that henceforth shaped everything that Piper would write, preach, and become in his ministry.

As Piper's two most influential teachers, Fuller and Edwards continued to play significant roles in shaping his theological perspective. It was Fuller's guidance and Edwards' writings that allowed him to see that the rational, logical exploration of doctrine and the devotional, emotive expressions of spirituality were not opposed to one another.

Piper states,

Edwards has ushered me closer into the presence of God than any other writer has. He has done this by depicting God in a way so authentic and so powerful that to read and understand is to experience the reality beyond the description. Edwards has been there where few of us ever get to go in this life and he has sought and found words that, for me at least, not only inform but transport. Penetrating logic and spiritual responses of the affections mingle in Edwards like branch and fruit, fire and heat, pain and weeping. They are inextricably wed.³⁷

It is evident from Piper's own writings that he has followed closely in Edwards' footsteps.

Other works that Piper lists as significant in his own theological development include

Stephen Charnock's *The Existence and Attributes of God*, John Owen's *Works*, Thomas

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷John Piper, "Books That Have Influenced Me Most" [on-line]; accessed 17 May 2001; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/Online_Library/OnlineArticles/Subjects/Leadership.../books.htm; Internet.

Watson's *Body of Divinity*, Charles Spurgeon's *Lectures to my Students*, numerous books and sermons by C.S. Lewis, and in the area of New Testament, works by George Ladd.³⁸ As one might recognize, most of Piper's significant influences in theology and seminary supported and refined his Calvinism.

Piper's calvinistic views, however, did not diminish his concern for and interest in world missions. While at Fuller, seeds for missions were planted in his heart that would later yield tremendous fruit during his pastorate at Bethlehem Baptist Church. Ralph Winter, one of the major forces behind the founding of Fuller's U. S. Center for World Missions, was Piper's most influential missions professor while in seminary. Piper holds that Winter helped him realize "God's extraordinary providence in awakening world missions."³⁹ His subsequent realization of the number of unreached people groups in the world would lead him to later develop a strategy for world missions based upon the biblical phrase "Panta ta Ethne."⁴⁰ When asked what works were significant in developing his missions awareness at this time, Piper noted three primary influences. The first was simply biographies of great missionaries. Along with these inspirational works, he includes Hawthorne's *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* and Allen's *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*⁴¹

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 2 October 2000, Minneapolis, notes.

⁴⁰This strategy is described in the text *Let the Nations Be Glad* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993). It will be delineated later in this work.

⁴¹Piper, telephone interview by author, 2 October 2000. On a side note, when asked about Donald McGavran, Piper said he read some of McGavran's material for background, but found him boring.

Piper finished his master's degree at Fuller with what he calls his "vertical" Christianity in place; he firmly believed that one could not honor God without enjoying Him. As he continued with his doctoral work, he then began to struggle with his "horizontal" Christianity, asking himself if he was truly a loving person. In developing his Christian Hedonism, he was struggling with the phrase from 1 Corinthians 13, "love seeks not its own." The premise of his developing ideology was that one must seek their own pleasure in God in order to truly honor God – a seeming contradiction to the verse.⁴² How was the Christian Hedonist to fulfill the scriptural imperative to love others? This struggle dominated his thought during his doctoral work and likely played a significant role in the selection of his dissertation topic and title: *Love Your Enemies: Jesus' Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and the Early Christian Paraenesis*.

His contention was finally worked out during his tenure at Bethel. In 1977, he wrote an article entitled "Dissatisfied Contentment: Toward an Ethic of Christian Hedonism."⁴³ It was published a few years later in *HIS* with the title "Holy Hedonism."⁴⁴ In the article, he briefly outlines "vertical" hedonism. Then, reflecting back on First Corinthians 13:5, he concludes that "horizontal" hedonism required recognizing, "that in view of our tremendous longing to be happy, the only way we can treat other persons not merely as means to our end is to have our longings satisfied in God first. Then, out of the fullness of that contentment, we will be free to overflow in kindness to others. . . . love

⁴²Piper, interview by author, 14 May 2001.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴John Piper, "Holy Hedonism," *HIS* 42, no. 2 (1981): 29-31.

springs from a heart fully content in the promises of God.”⁴⁵ His conclusion, however, led to another critical problem: perfect contentment means the end of all desires and thus the absence of any motive to seek the happiness of another.⁴⁶

For an answer to this problem, Piper “pondered the analogy between God’s motives and our motives”⁴⁷ and went all the way back to the reason for creation:

Why did God create the world? Surely not, as some popular theology has it, because he was lonely and frustrated and needed man to make him happy. Before creation God was, in a profound sense, content in the fellowship of the Trinity. What moved him then to create the world?

The closest I can come to an answer is this: God was profoundly happy and joyful, and he wanted to share that joy with others. Joy’s very nature causes it to expand and extend itself by involving others in it. God’s joy acts in the same way. As Jonathan Edwards says in *Works I*, “It is no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain, that it is inclined to overflow.” This tendency of joy to expand moved God to create beings to share in his joy. Thus creation was a supreme act of love because it aimed at the joy of the creature.

But God was not indifferent to his act of creation. It was his *joy* in his own perfection that overflowed in creating beings to share that joy. His joy to create was also his desire. Therefore when we say “love does not seek its own” we must not imply that when God loves he is not seeking his own happiness. He is. For *his* happiness consists partly in the expansion of that happiness to others. That is, his happiness consists in love. *In a sense love does seek its own*. It seeks its own happiness by bringing joy to others.⁴⁸

Thus, the ethical command to love given in Scripture is to come from a “dissatisfied contentment” whereby the contented Christian expresses a love that seeks joy. Love “seeks its own happiness in the joy of the beloved” and thus, “the desire for happiness is the proper motive for every good deed. . . . The person who abandons the pursuit of his

⁴⁵Ibid., 30.

⁴⁶Ibid., 31.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

own pleasure abandons the possibility of loving man and pleasing God.”⁴⁹

With this last development, Christian Hedonism had reached full theological expression. Piper had developed a system of thought that offered a unique, yet historically founded way of fulfilling the two greatest commandments: how to love God and how to love others. The next challenge would be to bring this ideological perspective to bear on the practical disciplines of Christian ministry. That opportunity would come in 1980 when Piper accepted the pastorate of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. Interestingly enough, world missions would provide the context in which Christian Hedonism would reach its full practical expression.

Evolution of Thought within the Bethlehem Ministry Context

There had actually been periods early on in Piper’s life when he had struggled with an overwhelming “cynicism” regarding the church. As he started seminary in Pasadena, he was fearful for the future of God’s people noting that “the mood in the late sixties was inhospitable to the local church.”⁵⁰ Thankfully, God rescued him from his cynicism toward the church, ministry, and pastoring by placing him with the people of Lake Avenue Church under the leadership Ray Ortlund. Here he encountered a pastor that “exuded the spirit of Paul when he looked out on his flock and said, ‘My joy, my crown of exaltation.’”⁵¹

That formative experience took on new importance about ten years later when

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Piper, *Desiring God*, 233.

⁵¹Ibid.

he faced another very personal struggle in regards to his own call and ministry. As he wrote in his journal late one evening in October of 1979, the issue he was grappling with was whether or not God wanted him to continue teaching Biblical Studies at Bethel. He later described what God did that night:

One of the things God was doing in those days was giving me a deeper love for the church – the gathered, growing, ministering body of people that meet week in and week out and move into the likeness of Christ. Teaching had its joys. It is a great calling. But that night another passion triumphed, and God led me, over the next months, to Bethlehem Baptist Church.⁵²

In 1980, when Piper began his ministry at Bethlehem, the membership numbered about 750, Sunday morning worship attendance ran between three and four hundred, and there were a total of thirty-three baptisms for the year.⁵³ At that time, the church already had a long, established history in Minneapolis. The church had been founded as the Second Congregational Church of Minneapolis in the early 1870s on the corner of 8th Street and 13th Avenue South.⁵⁴ It ministered to the Scandinavian and Swedish peoples of Minneapolis well into the mid-twentieth century. The sanctuary built at this site in the 1870s was home to this congregation, renamed Bethlehem Baptist Church in 1945, until a new sanctuary was built on the same property in 1991.⁵⁵

When Piper came to Bethlehem in 1980, he had not yet published any books, but he did continue to publish a number of articles each year in various publications. Soon

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Annual Report: 1980,” Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, January 1981.

⁵⁴Bethlehem Baptist Church, Church Photo Directory, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, 1999, 4.

⁵⁵Ibid., 4-13.

after assuming the pastorate, he began to write for *The Standard* which is the publication for the Baptist General Conference.⁵⁶ It is obvious through these articles that God was coupling his keen theological intellect with a pastor's heart – Christian Hedonism was blossoming as it sank its roots deep into the fertile hearts of this body of believers. In 1983, Baker Book House published his first book. It was a text that Piper had completed while teaching biblical studies at Bethel: *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological study of Romans 9:1-23*. It was a technical text examining God's righteousness, election, and predestination in the book of Romans.

Aside from publishing his first book, 1983 proved to be a critical year for Piper, for Christian Hedonism, and for Bethlehem Baptist Church in another significant way. It was during this year that God brought him to another defining moment in his theological development. Up to this point in his ministry, Piper had focused his ministry on proclaiming the character and greatness of God, and on introducing Christian Hedonism to his congregation. He and his staff certainly believed in missions, but as Tom Steller notes, "missions just wasn't on the front burner" at this time.⁵⁷ By the autumn of 1983, some of the students under the ministry of Bethlehem began to feel called to missions. Also at this time, Piper and his staff were becoming acquainted with the "people group" concept that

⁵⁶A simple reading of the bibliography confirms this fact. Many of these articles have now been compiled into books.

⁵⁷Tom Steller, Pastor for Missions and Leadership Development, interview by author, 14 May 2001, Minneapolis, tape recording. Tom Stellar is the only staff member who has been with Piper since the beginning of his pastorate. He was a student of Piper's at Bethel and was already attending Bethlehem before the church called Piper. Piper brought him on staff part-time just a few weeks after he came to Bethlehem. By 1983, he was full time and his title was Minister of Students and Education.

was coming out of the U.S. Center for World Missions at Fuller.⁵⁸ Previously, most missions strategies were focused upon missionaries going into “countries.” The people group concept noted that missionaries could be in all the countries of the world yet almost half of the languages and cultures would be unreached. In fact, 99 percent of missionaries that were being sent overseas until the mid- 1970s were going to people groups that were already reached.⁵⁹

This information, coupled with the subtle way the Holy Spirit was moving in the congregation, created a burden on the hearts of both Piper and Steller. Piper was realizing that they were not focused on missions the way they ought to be at Bethlehem.⁶⁰ Then, one evening in October of 1983, Steller and Piper separately experienced simultaneous spiritual burdens that literally drove them to weep for world missions. The Holy Spirit awoke them to the fact that the glory of God was at stake in the Great Commission. As a result, they began to ask serious questions about how to make Bethlehem Baptist a missions sending platform for the unreached peoples of the world.⁶¹

God continued to confirm His will for Bethlehem a month later when another critical step in Piper’s development occurred. The church’s missions committee asked Piper to preach at the yearly missions conference at Bethlehem. From his start in 1980 up through 1982, he had never brought a message during this November conference; he always allowed guest speakers to do the preaching. At the time, he was doing a series on

⁵⁸Ibid. This concept will be treated more fully later under the discussion of “*Panta ta Ethne*” in the fourth chapter.

⁵⁹Piper, interview by author, 14 May 2001.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Piper, “Doing Missions When Dying Is Gain.”

Christian Hedonism, and so he prepared a message for the series that would coincide with the missions conference. Piper notes that this was the first focused missions message he had done in his three years at BBC.⁶² The title of that sermon was “Missions: The Battle Cry of Christian Hedonism,” and the preparation and preaching of this message led to an incredible awakening in Piper’s life. Through this message, he “saw the glory of God, the happiness of man, and the reaching of the nations as inextricably linked.”⁶³

This series of nine sermons later became the nine chapters of the book *Desiring God*, but it was the sermon on missions that was the culmination and capstone of Piper’s evolving philosophy of Christian Hedonism.⁶⁴ God had ignited within him a passion for unreached peoples, and a theological and missiological awakening was about to hit Bethlehem Baptist.

Steller notes that in the months that followed the missions conference, “missions was in the air” at Bethlehem and the burden upon their hearts was growing ever-stronger.⁶⁵ In March of 1984, Piper decided to hold his first “Missions at the Manse” meeting. Speaking of this occasion, he wrote,

My wife Noel and I invited everyone in the church who was remotely considering the possibility of entering domestic or frontier missions to come to our house for prayer, worship, and challenge. We promised to pray by name every day for the rest of the year for everyone who came. We prayed that sixty would come. We took all the furniture out of our living room and dining room, and

⁶²Piper, interview by author, 14 May 2001.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Steller, interview by author, 14 May 2001.

ninety people came.⁶⁶

Steller notes that they were overwhelmed by the response to their invitation.⁶⁷ Later that year, his title was changed to Associate Pastor for Students and Missions, and that summer he took twenty-five people from BBC to Fuller Seminary where they took the USCMW's course "Perspectives on the World Christian Movement."⁶⁸ Those twenty-five then returned to teach and share the vision with the congregation. In a related move, the "90 by 90" vision was also born at Bethlehem that summer. The goal of this endeavor was to send ninety church members into vocational ministries at home or short-term and vocational ministries abroad by 1990. As Piper notes, it was a time when God was "riveting our attention on the hidden peoples and igniting our affections for the majesty of God and his global purpose."⁶⁹

The next few years at Bethlehem were a period when the spiritual fires for world missions grew into raging infernos. Piper wrote during this period,

Missions zeal has come down like a river from the mountain of worship. The glory of God took us captive. Then his purpose to fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory gripped us. Then the vision of persons "from every tongue and tribe and people and nation" before the throne clarified our focus. The thrill of being involved in the final thrust to find and evangelize those people moved us to strategize.⁷⁰

In fact, the movement was so strong that some in his congregation wondered if the "new

⁶⁶John Piper, "Frontier Ferment in the Local Church," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 2 (1984): 203-04.

⁶⁷Steller, interview by author, 14 May 2001.

⁶⁸Piper, "Frontier Ferment in the Local Church," 203.

⁶⁹Ibid., 203-204.

⁷⁰Ibid., 205.

zeal for the frontier missions and enthusiasm for the USCWM” was threatening their dedication to the Baptist General Conference’s missions program and their continuing commitment to domestic ministries.⁷¹ Piper responded with an article that was later published in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*. The article, entitled “Frontier Ferment in the Local Church,” was written to defend the missiological awakening at Bethlehem by pointing out that a frontier missions focus would serve to deepen and further the church’s dedication to BGC missions and domestic ministries. In specific regards to domestic ministries, Piper wrote, “The goal of frontier missions is domestic ministries. The goal of a missionary is to help plant a church that will do in its own culture all the life-changing domestic ministries that the American church ought to be doing in America.”⁷²

At this time, Piper and Steller did become more involved in BGC missions endeavors, noting that “The cause of frontier missions has given us a desire to shape, not forsake our Conference mission strategy.”⁷³ They met with denominational leaders to begin what they hoped would be “an exciting partnership and dialogue – especially regarding the unreached peoples.”⁷⁴ This dialogue was likely a factor that led to Piper’s election to the Foreign Mission Board of the BGC in 1985.⁷⁵ Once he was on the Board, he was asked to write a paper on unreached people groups for the denomination. Entitled

⁷¹Ibid., 204.

⁷²Ibid., 209.

⁷³Ibid., 206.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Annual Report: 1985,” Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, January 1986, 4.

“The Supremacy of God ‘among All the Nations,’” this paper later became the fifth chapter of *Let the Nations Be Glad*. Steller holds that the paper was a critical factor in turning the BGC toward a frontier missions mentality.⁷⁶ Piper was still serving the BGC on this same Board (renamed the Board of World Missions) in 1989,⁷⁷ and his influence had literally helped change the course of his denomination’s missions program. In 1990, the Baptist General Conference was featured in the USCWM’s periodical, *Mission Frontiers*, as the model denomination for frontier missions to unreached peoples.⁷⁸ Piper’s theological perspective on missions was truly impacting the world.

There were a few other important theological developments in Piper’s ministry during this period. In 1989, his burgeoning concern for evangelism led him to preach a series of sermons entitled “Quest for Joy” that would later be the basis for a gospel tract produced by Desiring God Ministries.⁷⁹ Additionally, he published five more books from 1990 to 1991, most of them being compilations or continuations of articles, lectures, and sermons that he had completed. In 1990, Baker Book House published *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*. This short text won *Preaching* magazine’s “Book of the Year” award and is still acclaimed by many great evangelical preachers and theologians as one of the

⁷⁶Steller, interview by author, 14 May 2001.

⁷⁷Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Annual Report: 1989,” Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, January 1990, 4.

⁷⁸Steller, interview by author, 14 May 2001.

⁷⁹Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Annual Report: 1989,” Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, January 1990, 3. The “Quest for Joy” tract will be examined in detail at a later point.

greatest texts on the “why” and “how” of exalting God in the pulpit.⁸⁰ Baker Book House also published his dissertation in 1991. In both 1990 and 1991, he brought his theological acumen and conservative perspective to bear on the issue of gender roles by authoring and co-editing books on biblical manhood and womanhood.⁸¹ Published by Crossway, these texts distinguished him as a leading force on the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. However, out of these five texts, one in particular was the result of significant theological development in Piper’s life: *The Pleasures of God: God’s Delight in Being God*.

Early in 1987, Piper was reading through Henry Scougal’s *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*⁸² for the second time. Early in the book, he came across the statement “The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love.”⁸³ Piper contemplated this statement for some time, and he reasoned, “If this is true for man, may it not also be true for God? Is it not also the case that the worth and excellency of *God’s* soul is to be measured by the object of His love?”⁸⁴ He continues,

To know a soul’s proportions you need to know its passions. The true dimensions of a soul are seen in its delights. . . . So it is with God. The worth and

⁸⁰John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), front and back covers.

⁸¹John Piper, *What’s the Difference: Manhood and Womanhood Defined according to the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990); John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991).

⁸²Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1961).

⁸³John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Books, 1991), 15.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

excellency of *God's* soul is to be measured by the object of his love. It is even more true for him than for us that love is that powerful and prevalent passion of the soul on which both its perfection and happiness depend. So if God's love is his powerful and prevalent passion – the omnipotent energy of his approval and enjoyment and delight – then “the pleasures of God” are the measure of the excellency of his soul.⁸⁵

This insight created in Piper an intense hunger to know God by knowing what pleases Him. He reasoned, “Beholding is a way of becoming. So if the pleasures of God are the mark of his excellency, or his glory, then meditating on these pleasures holds out great hope for being changed into his likeness.”⁸⁶ With this incentive, Piper retreated for four days into northern Minnesota with a Bible and concordance where he looked up every verse on God's delights, pleasures, and joys. The final results were a series of sermons on the character of God and a book on God's delight in being God.⁸⁷ In the introduction to *The Pleasures of God*, he writes,

I regard this book as a vision of God through the lens of his happiness. What the church and the world need today, more than anything else, is to know and love God – the great, glorious, sovereign, happy God of the Bible. Very few people think of God as supremely happy in the fellowship of the Trinity and in the work of creation and redemption. The volcanic exuberance of God over the worth of his Son and the work of his hands and the welfare of his people is not well-known. God's delight in being God is not sung the way it should be, with wonder and passion, in the worship places of the world. And we are the poorer and weaker for it.

My hope and prayer in writing this book is that more and more people would meditate with me on the pleasures of God; and that in doing so we would focus our attention on his excellency and glory. In this way our souls would be increasingly satisfied with God and changed gradually into his likeness. Thus, more and more, would God's glory be manifest in the world through the mission of his church.⁸⁸

⁸⁵Ibid., 16-17.

⁸⁶Ibid., 17.

⁸⁷Ibid., 17-18.

⁸⁸Ibid., 18.

One can detect within this quotation the flavor of Christian Hedonism with its concentration on God and man's ultimate satisfaction in God. Yet this text is decidedly more God-focused than *Desiring God*; perhaps one of the reasons why Piper says *The Pleasures of God* should have actually preceded *Desiring God*.⁸⁹

One particularly interesting fact for this work to note is the ramifications Piper says the "pleasures of God" have on the gospel message. He contends that the gospel must begin with the fact that God is perfect, complete, and "overflowingly happy in the eternal fellowship of the trinity." He is not deficient without man, rather, man is deficient without Him.⁹⁰ He notes,

Unless we begin with God in this way, when the gospel comes to us, we will inevitably put ourselves at the center of it. We will feel that *our* value, rather than *God's* value is the driving force in the gospel. We will trace the gospel back to God's need for *us* instead of tracing it back to the sovereign grace that rescues sinners who need *God*.

But the gospel is the good news that God is the all-satisfying end of all our longings, and that even though he does not need us, and is in fact estranged from us because of our God-belittling sins, he has, in the great love with which he loved us, made a way for sinners to drink at the river of his delights through Jesus Christ. And we will not be enthralled by this good news unless we feel that he was not obliged to do this. He was not coerced or constrained by our value. *He* is the center of the gospel. The exaltation of *his* glory is the driving force of the gospel. The gospel is a gospel of *grace*! And grace is the pleasure of God to magnify the worth of God by giving sinners the right and power to delight in God without obscuring the glory of God.⁹¹

Much like *Desiring God*, the theological development represented by *The Pleasures of God* influenced all of the other forthcoming works by Piper. The sovereignty and supremacy of God established by this work gave new depth to Christian Hedonism

⁸⁹Ibid., 9.

⁹⁰Ibid., 18-19.

⁹¹Ibid., 19.

and a renewed fervor to Piper to make God's glory known to all peoples. That fervor led to another important publication. In 1993, Piper published his first text on missions. In *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, Piper brought a new perspective to bear on world evangelization, a perspective rooted in worship. The first chapter of the book opened boldly:

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.⁹²

The theological ideals set forth in *Desiring God* and *The Pleasures of God* are plainly evident as he develops his approach to world missions through worship. First he develops the God-ward aspect:

The ultimate foundation for our passion to see God glorified is his own passion to be glorified. God is central and supreme in his own affections. There are no rivals for the supremacy of God's glory in his own heart. God is not an idolater. He does not disobey the first and great commandment. With all his heart and soul and strength and mind he delights in the glory of his manifold perfections. The most passionate heart for God in all the universe is God's heart. This truth, more than any other I know, seals the conviction that worship is the fuel and goal of missions.⁹³

To this aspect he then adds the human dimension of Christian Hedonism:

The liberating fact is that the message we take to the frontiers is that people everywhere should seek their own best interest. We are summoning people to God. And those who come say, "In your presence is fullness of joy and at your right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Psalm 16:11). God glorifies himself among the nations with the command, "Delight yourself in the Lord!" (Psalm 37:4). His first and great requirement of all men everywhere is that they repent from seeking their joy in other things and begin to seek only him. A God who cannot be served is a God who can only be enjoyed. The great sin of the world

⁹²John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 11.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 15.

is not that the human race has failed to work for God so as to *increase* his glory, but that we have failed to delight in God so as to *reflect* his glory. For God's glory is most reflected in us when we are most delighted in him.⁹⁴

With this text, Piper once again put forth an entirely unique view born out of his theological and ideological perspective. It was the fruit of all that God had been doing in his heart since that first missions sermon in 1983. His equation was very simple: the purpose of missions is worship, the power of missions is prayer, and the price of missions is suffering.⁹⁵ The first three chapters of the text addressed these three purposes, while the latter two chapters addressed the necessity of explicit saving faith in Christ alone and the strategy of going unto "All the Nations."⁹⁶ Though now almost ten years old, this book remains the clearest, most concise expression of Piper's approach to world missions.

In terms of theological evolution, only two more significant developments took place between 1993 and the present. First, in 1995, Piper published *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*. The book was not so much a new theological perspective as it was a new expression of his theology. In this text, Piper presented the Christian Hedonist's approach to sanctification. As he states in the introduction, the aim of the book is "to examine how the faith, which is alone the means through which *pardoning grace* justifies, is also the faith through which *empowering grace* sanctifies."⁹⁷

He elaborates,

In no way do I mean to confound justification and sanctification. . . . In regard to

⁹⁴Ibid., 33.

⁹⁵Ibid., 5.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995), 21.

justification, faith is not the channel through which a power or a transformation flows to the soul of the believer, but rather faith is the occasion of God's forgiving and acquitting and reckoning as righteous. These justifying acts of God do not in themselves touch the soul of man. They are *extra nos* – outside ourselves. Paul speaks of the justification of the “ungodly” (Romans 4:5). We do not remain ungodly, but we do begin as “justified ungodly.” However, in regard to sanctification, faith is indeed the channel through which divine power and transformation flow to the soul; and the work of God through faith does indeed touch the soul, and change it.⁹⁸

From this starting point, the book addresses the practicalities of sanctification based upon three assumptions. They are:

1. Justifying faith is persevering faith – it is proper to speak of the moral effectiveness of justifying faith not merely because it brings us into a right standing with God at the first moment of its exercise, but also because it is a persevering sort of faith, whose effectiveness resides also in its daily embrace of all that God is for us in Jesus.
2. Justifying faith is not only a trusting in the past grace of God, but also trusting in the future grace of God – standing on the bygone grace of Christ's death and resurrection, justifying faith is a future-oriented trust in the promises of God.
3. The essence (though not the sum total) of justifying faith is *being satisfied with all that God is (and promises to be) for us in Jesus.*⁹⁹

Thus, Piper firmly dispels the motive of repayment or indebtedness to God for sanctification by calling Christians to daily trust in the nature of God, the power of God to transform, and the “future grace” that is set forth in His promises to His children.

The second theological evolution that Piper has been going through since the early nineties is his developing perspective of suffering. As already noted, the third chapter of *Let the Nations Be Glad* stated at length that the price of global missions was suffering. *Future Grace* likewise contains two chapters on suffering and dying. In 1996, when the 10th Anniversary Edition of *Desiring God* was published, it concluded with a

⁹⁸Ibid., 26.

⁹⁹Ibid., 26-27.

completely new chapter on suffering. *The Hidden Smile of God*, published in 2001 was subtitled “The Fruit of Affliction in the lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd.” It deals entirely with how God was glorified through the sufferings of these great men of the faith. In *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, published also in 2001, the closing chapter on missions deals almost entirely with sacrifice and suffering. Finally, one of his latest texts, *The Misery of Job and the Mercies of God*, is a poem about how the sovereign goodness of God is at work even in suffering.

Why has suffering become such a significant theme in so many of Piper’s latest works? The answer to that question lies in understanding the logical outcome of Christian Hedonism:

We measure the worth of a hidden treasure by what we will gladly sell to buy it. If we will sell all, then we measure the worth as supreme. If we will not, what we have is treasured more. “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then *in his joy* he goes and sells *all that he has* and buys that field” (Matthew 13:44). The extent of his *sacrifice* and the depth of his *joy* display the worth he puts on the treasure of God. Loss and suffering, joyfully accepted for the kingdom of God, show the supremacy of God’s worth more clearly in the world than all worship and prayer.¹⁰⁰

The consistent focus of Piper’s theological perspective is the supremacy and ultimate worth of God. From that primary precept flows this secondary truth: man’s purpose and joy comes in forsaking all the temporary pleasures and possessions of creation and ascribing ultimate worth to God in worship. A man’s life is his ultimate, most valuable possession. When Christians willingly and joyfully endure suffering and martyrdom for the glory of God, they are demonstrating to the world the ultimate worth of God. Thus, suffering rightly borne is the Christian Hedonist’s supreme expression of worship. Piper solidifies this idea as follows:

¹⁰⁰Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 71.

This is the essence of Christian Hedonism. In the pursuit of joy through suffering, we magnify the all-satisfying worth of the Source of our joy. God himself shines as the brightness at the end of our tunnel of pain. If we do not communicate that he is the goal and ground of our joy in suffering, then the very meaning of our suffering will be lost. The meaning is this: God is gain. God is gain. God is gain.¹⁰¹

As Piper develops this doctrine of suffering, there are two truths in particular he notes about suffering. First, he is careful to point out that the Bible is replete with verses that promise God's people will suffer because of their faith, because of the work of Satan, and because humanity exists in a world infected with sin. In short, suffering is a certainty, and anyone who teaches that committing one's life to Christ will result in ease, earthly comfort, human acceptance, and the absence of suffering is either a false teacher or is grossly ignorant of the scriptures. In fact, he is quick to point out verses like Philippians 1:29 that speak of suffering as a gift from God: "To you it has been granted [*echarsthe* = *graciously given*] for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also *to suffer for His sake*."¹⁰² Thus, suffering should be embraced for the glory of God. Second, and most importantly, Piper points out that God is absolutely sovereign, providential, and loving when He ordains suffering. He refuses to follow the path of many other evangelicals who deny God's sovereignty or who merely assign all suffering to sin and Satan. He writes,

It is a great sadness when sufferers seek relief by sparing God his sovereignty over pain. The sadness is that this undercuts the very hope it aims to create. When all forty-two chapters of the book of Job are said and done, the inspired author leaves us with an unshakable and undoubted fact: God governs all things for his good purposes.

The text says Job's brothers and sisters "comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him" (Job 42:11). This is the author speaking, not a misguided character in the drama. Whatever Satan's liberty in unleashing calamity upon us, God never drops the leash that binds his neck.

¹⁰¹Piper, *Desiring God*, 238.

¹⁰²Piper, *Future Grace*, 341.

Jesus' brother James rounds out the picture with his interpretation: "You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful" (James 5:11). In other words, the Lord is sovereign, and the Lord is sweet.

Pain and loss are bitter providences. Who has lived long in this world of woe without weeping, sometimes until the head throbs and there are no more tears to lubricate the convulsing of our amputated love? But O, the folly of trying to lighten the ship of suffering by throwing God's governance overboard. The very thing the tilting ship needs in the storm is the ballast of God's good sovereignty, not the unburdening of deep and precious truth. What makes the crush of calamity sufferable is not that God shares our shock, but that his bitter providences are laden with the bounty of love.¹⁰³

Such insights are both profound and rare in contemporary theological circles. Yet suffering is a subject Piper does not avoid. As noted earlier, the subject of suffering is a prominent subject in Piper's latest works. In the next chapter, Piper's particular view of how suffering serves missions and evangelism will be fully delineated.

What theological developments might yet be coming in the life and ministry of John Piper? Only time holds the answer to that question. In recent months, he has brought his theological acumen and his pastor's insight to bear on issues like racial harmony, the Middle-East crisis, and Jewish evangelism. Given his passion for God, his love for scripture, and his yearning for world missions, it seems likely that God has much more to accomplish through Piper's ministry. For now, Piper pushes forward to proclaim the central truth of his ministry: "We exist to know and enjoy and glorify God."¹⁰⁴ His goal is to get his people to love God more than the things of the world, for when they do, they will become passionate soul-winners.¹⁰⁵ As he says in *Let the Nations Be Glad*, "God

¹⁰³John Piper, *The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 8-9.

¹⁰⁴Piper, interview by author, 14 May 2001.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

is calling us above all else to be the kind of people whose theme and passion is the supremacy of God in all of life. No one will be able to rise to the magnificence of the missionary cause who does not feel the magnificence of Christ. There will be no big world vision without a big God.”¹⁰⁶ It is to the theological tenets of his evangelistic ministry that this work now turns.

¹⁰⁶Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 40.

CHAPTER 3

THE THEOLOGICAL TENETS

Jonathan Edwards in Piper's Theology

As this work turns to the theological tenets, it is important for the reader to understand how large a role the writings and sermons of Jonathan Edwards have had in guiding John Piper. Although this fact was already stated in the previous section on his theological development, just how much Piper's theology is a reflection of Edwards' cannot be understated. It was during his theological awakenings in seminary that Piper was introduced to the depths of Jonathan Edwards. Following the advice of a seminary professor, he then set about the lifelong task of understanding and mastering Edwards' thought.¹ In so doing, he has become the modern embodiment of Edwardsian theology and philosophy.

In 1998, Piper published *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards*. In this text, Piper makes it very clear that it was in Edwards' writings that he found the most developed perspective of what he has called Christian Hedonism.

A quote from Edwards' *Miscellanies* supports this fact:

God is glorified within Himself these two ways: 1. By appearing . . . to Himself in His own perfect idea [of Himself], or in His Son, who is the brightness of His glory. 2. By enjoying and delighting in Himself, by flowing forth in infinite love

¹John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 83.

and delight towards Himself, or in his Holy Spirit. . . . So God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to . . . their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of Himself. . . . *God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.* When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart. God made the world that He might communicate, and the creature receive, His glory; and that it might [be] received both by the mind and heart. He that testifies his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it.²

Speaking of the above quote and of Edwards' vision of God, Piper writes, "I can scarcely overstate what it has meant in my life and theology and preaching. Virtually everything I write is an effort to explain and illustrate that truth. . . [that] there is no final conflict between God's passion to be glorified and man's passion to be satisfied."³

Thus, Christian Hedonism and the majority of Piper's theological perspectives have in some way been founded upon, defined by, and even handed down to him by Jonathan Edwards. Piper expresses this fact in the third chapter of *God's Passion for His Glory*. Here he speaks at length about his thirty year pilgrimage with Edwards. He delineates how Edwards' keen philosophical reasoning and careful attention to the Bible helped him define his views on the glory of God, the Trinity, original sin, Calvinism, moral accountability, divine love, religious affections, and the nature of truth.⁴ He even included in this book the full text of what he considers to be one of Edwards' most significant works. Regarding this inclusion, he writes, "The rediscovery of Edwards' God-centered

²Ibid., 79. Piper is quoting from Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, ed. Thomas Schafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 495.

³Ibid., 79-80.

⁴Ibid., 77-97.

moral vision in *The End for Which God Created the World* is my aim. And I pray that this endeavor will serve the purpose of God in our day to fill the hollow sounds of our God-neglect and its fatal successes. May the Lord restore a passion for truth and a passion for his glory, which has largely 'disappeared from the modern evangelical world.'"⁵

Piper is doing his part to see the fulfillment of the prayer expressed above. He sees it as one of the responsibilities of his ministry to bring Edwards' God-entranced, scripturally-saturated views back to the forefront of evangelical thinking. This fact is borne out in his writings. Edwards receives prominent mention and treatment in virtually every work published by Piper.⁶ As Piper notes, this generation needs Edwards' theocentric emphasis to rescue it from trivial faith in a diminished God:

My own judgment is that, from generation to generation, giants like Edwards are needed to inspire us to think about our faith, and to guard us from settling superficially on small ideas about a small God. We need Edwards to waken us from our pragmatic stupor of indifference to doctrine in worship and prayer and evangelism and missions and church planting and social action. We need Edwards to show us again the beauty and power of truth. Edwards does this so well because he is relentlessly God-besotted and God-exalting. He helps us recover truth because he never loses sight of the unspeakable reality of God, where truth originates, and whom it exists to serve.

Edwards has taught me – as one modern evangelical – that our concern with truth is an inevitable expression of our concern with God. If God exists, then he is the measure of all things, and what he thinks about all things is the measure of what we should think. Not to care about truth is not to care about God. To love God passionately is to love truth passionately. Being God-centered in life means being truth-driven in ministry. What is not true is not of God. What is false is anti-God. Indifference to the truth is indifference to the mind of God. Pretense is rebellion against reality, and what makes reality reality is God. Our concern with truth is simply an echo of our concern with God. And all that is rooted in God's concern with God, or God's passion for the glory of God.⁷

⁵Ibid., xiv. The phrase Piper quotes is from David Wells' *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 300.

⁶A simple review of the Person Index in each of his books supports this fact.

⁷Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 97.

As this work continues with the delineation and examination of Piper's theology of evangelism, the reader will undoubtedly recognize the spirit of Edwards at every turn. In his writing, preaching, praying, ministering, and leadership, Piper's love for the truth of God and the glory of God shines like a beacon to all who encounter Him. It is this spirit that has made him a powerful voice for orthodox evangelicalism, and it is this spirit that feeds his passion for missions and evangelism.

Piper's Conservative, Evangelical Theology

The four theological tenets that drive the evangelistic ministry of John Piper are: the sovereignty and supremacy of God; the depraved affections of man; conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist; and the glorifying witness of the church. These tenets are grounded in his basic conservative, evangelical presuppositions. Thus, this section will briefly establish the orthodox foundations of Piper's theology by delineating his views on a sampling of key evangelical issues: the Bible, the nature of God, the person of Christ, the nature of man, and salvation.

The Bible

In both the first edition and the tenth anniversary edition of *Desiring God*, Piper included a second appendix entitled "Is the Bible a reliable guide to lasting joy?" It was written in the hope that it would "help some to stand confidently on the scriptures as the very Word of God."⁸ In that appendix he writes,

You need not believe the Bible is infallible to discover that it presents a historical Person of incomparable qualities. On the contrary, the reasonable way to approach the Bible for the first time is to listen openly and honestly to its various

⁸John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 10th Anniversary Expanded ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1996), 124.

witnesses to Christ, to see if these witnesses and this person authenticate themselves. If they do, the things they and Christ say about the Bible itself will take on new authority, and you may well end up accepting the whole Bible (as I do!) As God's inspired, infallible Word.⁹

In his highly acclaimed preaching text, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, Piper speaks even more definitively on the subject of Scripture:

Where the Bible is esteemed as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, preaching can flourish. But where the Bible is treated merely as a record of valuable religious insight, preaching dies.

But it is not automatic that preaching will flourish where the Bible is believed to be inerrant. Among evangelicals today there are other effective ways for the power and authority of biblical preaching to be undercut. There are subjectivist epistemologies that belittle propositional revelation. There are linguistic theories that cultivate an exegetical atmosphere of ambiguity. There is a kind of popular, cultural relativism that enables people to dispense flippantly with uncomfortable biblical teaching.

Where these kinds of things take root, the Bible will be silenced in the church, and the preaching will become a reflection of current issues and religious opinions. . . . All Christian preaching should be the exposition and application of biblical texts. Our authority as preachers sent by God rises and falls with our manifest allegiance to the text of Scripture.¹⁰

Piper is consistent in his high acclaim for the role and authority of the Bible throughout his sermons and writings. Bethlehem Baptist Church likewise subscribes to this same level of scriptural authority. Both the Affirmation of Faith for BBC (see Appendix 2) and the Affirmation of Faith for The Bethlehem Institute state that the Bible is "the infallible Word of God, verbally inspired by God, and without error in the original manuscripts."¹¹ The TBI statement continues, "We believe that God's intentions, revealed

⁹Ibid., 268.

¹⁰John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 40-41.

¹¹Bethlehem Baptist Church, "Affirmation of Faith: The Bethlehem Institute," statement of beliefs for church developed training courses, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, 28 August 2000.

in the Bible, are the supreme and final authority in testing all claims about what is true and what is right. In matters not addressed by the Bible, what is true and right is assessed by criteria consistent with the teachings of scripture.”¹²

The Nature of God

As already noted in previous chapters of this work, Piper has a very high view of the Godhead. His theological perspective centers around the supremacy of God and His sovereignty over all things. One particularly powerful paragraph from *The Pleasures of God* reads,

So let us stand in awe and wonder of God – eternally happy in the fellowship of the Trinity; infinitely exuberant in the wisdom of his work; free and sovereign in his self-sufficiency. “Our God is in heaven; he does all that he pleases.” Let us humble ourselves under his mighty hand, and rejoice that his counsel will stand, and that one day all the families of the nations shall worship before him; for dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations!¹³

This one paragraph captures so many rich truths about God – truths that flow from Piper’s basic understanding of God. It is these truths that are present in virtually every page he has written and in every sermon he has preached. Once again, BBC’s Affirmation of Faith reflects Piper’s perspective. Speaking of the nature of God, it states, “We believe that there is one living and true God, eternally existing in three persons; that these are equal in every divine perfection, and that they execute distinct but harmonious offices in the work of creation, providence and redemption.”¹⁴ Specifically in terms of God the Father, it

¹²Ibid.

¹³John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God*, rev. and expanded (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 2000), 75.

¹⁴Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Affirmation of Faith: Bethlehem Baptist Church” [on-line]; accessed 26 January 2001; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/Online_Library/OnlineArticles/Theolog.../AffirmationFaith.htm; Internet.

says,

We believe in God the Father, an infinite, personal spirit, perfect in holiness, wisdom, power, and love. We believe that He infallibly foreknows all that shall come to pass, that He concerns Himself mercifully in the affairs of each person, that He hears and answers prayer, and that He saves from sin and death all who come to Him through Jesus Christ.¹⁵

The Person of Christ

The first chapter of *The Pleasures of God* is perhaps the best chapter in all of Piper's writings at delineating his understanding of the Person of Christ. His conclusion to this chapter offers incredible insight:

We may conclude that the pleasure of God in his Son is pleasure in himself. Since the Son is the image of God and the radiance of God and the form of God, equal with God, and indeed is God, therefore God's delight in the Son is delight in himself. The original, the primal, the deepest, the foundational joy of God is the joy he has in his own perfections as he sees them reflected in the glory of his Son. Paul speaks of "the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). From all eternity God had beheld the panorama of his own perfections in the face of his Son. All that he is he sees reflected fully and perfectly in the countenance of his Son. And in this he rejoices with infinite joy.¹⁶

In his text entitled *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*, Piper writes another wonderful paragraph on the nature of Christ:

Jesus Christ is the Creator of the universe. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last. Jesus Christ, the Person, never had a beginning. He is absolute Reality. He has the unparalleled honor and unique glory of being there first and always. He never came into being. He was eternally begotten. The Father has eternally enjoyed "the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Hebrews 1:3) in the Person of his Son.¹⁷

BBC's Affirmation of Faith solidifies the ideas presented in the quotations

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 42-43.

¹⁷John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 31.

above and adds to them the redemptive aspects of His work. It states, “We believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit. We believe in His virgin birth, sinless life, miracles and teachings. We believe in His substitutionary atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension into heaven, perpetual intercession for His people and personal visible return to earth.”¹⁸

The Nature of Man

In *Desiring God*, Piper gives the most poignant statement of man’s condition when he expounds the truth of Romans 3:23. He notes, “This is the way we ‘fall short’ of the glory of God: we exchange it for something of lesser value. All sin comes from not putting supreme value on the glory of God – this is the very essence of sin.”¹⁹ He continues,

None of us has trusted God the way we should. None of us has felt the depth and consistency of gratitude we owe him. None of us has obeyed him according to his wisdom and right. We have exchanged and dishonored his glory again and again. We have trusted ourselves. We have taken credit for his gifts. We have turned away from the path of his commandments because we thought we knew better. . . . We not only choose to sin, we *are* sinful. The Bible describes our heart as blind and hard and dead and unable to submit to the law of God. By nature we are “children of wrath.”²⁰

He further notes that as children of wrath, mankind deserves death and eternal punishment in hell: “Having held the glory of God in contempt through ingratitude and distrust and disobedience, we are sentenced to be excluded from the enjoyment of that glory forever and ever in the eternal misery of hell. . . . Hell is a place of torment. It is not merely the

¹⁸Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Affirmation of Faith.”

¹⁹Piper, *Desiring God* (1996), 56-57.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 57. Scripture notations are omitted from this quotation to limit length.

absence of pleasure. It is not annihilation. Jesus repeatedly describes it as an experience of fire.”²¹

This perspective is likewise borne out in the BBC statement of faith. It states, “We believe that man was created by God in His own image; that he sinned and thereby incurred physical, spiritual and eternal death, which is separation from God, that as a consequence, all human beings are born with a sinful nature and are sinners by choice and therefore under condemnation.”²² That condemnation justly reflects the severity of man’s disdain for God: “The infinite horrors of hell are intended by God to be a vivid demonstration of the infinite value of his glory which sinners have belittled. The biblical assumption of the justice of hell is the clearest testimony to the infiniteness of the sin of failing to glorify God.”²³

Salvation

Turning once more to the BBC Affirmation of Faith, we find God’s answer to mankind’s problem: Jesus Christ. It states, “We believe that those who repent and forsake sin and trust Jesus Christ as Savior are regenerated by the Holy Spirit and become new creatures, are delivered from condemnation and receive eternal life.”²⁴ Piper elaborates upon this truth in his writings:

If the most terrifying news in the world is that we have fallen under the condemnation of our Creator and that he is bound by his own righteous charac-

²¹Ibid.

²²Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Affirmation of Faith.”

²³John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 127.

²⁴Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Affirmation of Faith.”

ter to preserve the worth of his glory by pouring out his wrath on our sin, then the best news in all the world (the gospel!) is that God has decreed a way of salvation which also upholds the worth of his glory. He has given his Son to die for sinners and to conquer their death by his own resurrection.²⁵

The condition mankind must meet to appropriate the salvation provided in Christ is conversion. Piper notes that conversion consists of “repentance (turning from sin and unbelief) and faith (trusting in Christ alone for salvation).”²⁶

He further holds that Christ is the only provision for people to have “eternal happiness with God” because “there is no salvation apart from the salvation that Christ achieved in his death and resurrection.”²⁷ Not only is Christ the only way of salvation, but explicit faith in Him is an absolute necessity: “In order to believe on Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, you must believe on his name. Which means that you have to have heard of him and know who he is as a particular man who did a particular saving work and rose from the dead. . . . Therefore, people must call upon him and believe in him and hear him and be sent messengers with the ‘word of Christ.’”²⁸

This sampling of beliefs demonstrates that Piper is indeed a conservative evangelical with a strong love for the truths of Scripture. Much more could be written regarding his particular theological perspectives. However, it is the intent of this work to deal specifically with the unique tenets of his theology of evangelism. Thus, after setting forth some preliminary definitions, attention will turn to delineating the first of four tenets.

²⁵Piper, *Desiring God*, 60.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 61.

²⁷Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 128.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 150, 157.

Piper's Definitions for Evangelism and Missions

Before delving into the theological underpinnings for Piper's approach to evangelism, it is beneficial to first understand exactly what Piper means when he refers to missions and evangelism. Piper defines these terms in general and specific ways. First, in a general sense, Piper holds that "evangelism" is an umbrella term designating all activity to reach and lead people to faith in Jesus Christ.²⁹ "Missions," in a general sense, is anything done cross-culturally to reach people groups and plant churches.³⁰ In specific terms, Piper speaks of two types of missions. "Paul" missions are missions that press on to peoples with no indigenous witness at all. These efforts to reach unreached peoples are the "cutting edge of missions."³¹ The second specific definition of missions is what Piper calls "Timothy" missions. Timothy was a missionary to people where the church was already planted. Ephesus was foreign to him, but he was continuing in an established church. This definition of missions represents where most modern missionaries fall.³² Finally, in a specific sense, "evangelism" is what takes place when the church is planted, people in that particular culture are equipped, and they begin reaching people in their own culture and language.³³ As one might notice, Piper's specific definitions are reflective of

²⁹John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 16 April 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid. This definition is the definition Piper primarily uses in his writing, and it is the definition set forth on page 191 of *Desiring God* (1996).

³²Ibid. "Paul" and "Timothy" missions are also discussed at length in *The Pleasures of God*, 109-12.

³³Ibid.

the E1, E2, and E3 definitions of evangelism which he learned at Fuller.³⁴ With those definitions now delineated, the first theological tenet of Piper's evangelistic ministry will now be considered.

The Sovereignty and Supremacy of God

This particular tenet is the guiding doctrinal force of every aspect of Piper's life and ministry. It is the impetus behind every writing, the heart of every sermon, and the vision behind every decision at Bethlehem Baptist Church. The manner in which God is supreme is the very foundation for Christian Hedonism:

The ultimate ground of Christian Hedonism is the fact that God is uppermost in his own affections: *The chief end of God is to glorify God and enjoy himself forever.*

The reason this may sound strange is that we are more accustomed to think about our duty than God's design. And when we do ask about God's design we are too prone to describe it with ourselves at the center of God's affections. We may say, for example, his design is to redeem the world. Or to save sinners. Or to restore creation. Or the like.

But God's saving designs are penultimate, not ultimate. Redemption, salvation, and restoration are not God's ultimate goal. These he performs for the sake of something greater: namely, the enjoyment he has in glorifying himself. The bedrock foundation of Christian Hedonism is not God's allegiance to us, but to himself.

If God were not infinitely devoted to the preservation, display, and enjoyment of his own glory, we could have no hope of finding happiness in him. But if he does in fact employ all his sovereign power and infinite wisdom to maximize the enjoyment of his own glory, then we have a foundation on which to stand and rejoice.³⁵

Piper's view is thus very straight forward: God is supreme because He is God. The supreme God is also passionate about His supremacy; He is God-centered in all that He does. This view finds its roots in Jonathan Edwards' *The End for Which God Created the*

³⁴Ibid. For a discussion of E1, E2, and E3 evangelism, see Thom S. Rainer's *Book of Church Growth* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 22-23.

³⁵Piper, *Desiring God*, 33.

World:

[God] had respect to *himself*, as his last and highest end, in this work; because he is *worthy* in himself to be so, being infinitely the greatest and best of beings. All things else, with regard to worthiness, importance, and excellence, are perfectly as nothing in comparison of him. . . . All that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God's works is included in that one phrase, *the glory of God*.³⁶

Piper notes the logical conclusion of this view when he states that God "would be unrighteous if he valued anything more than what is supremely valuable, namely, himself."³⁷ Thus, from a God-ward perspective, God's supremacy is manifested in the fact that all He does is done to magnify the worth of His glory.

This understanding of God's supremacy must then be coupled with an understanding of His sovereignty, for it is God's sovereignty that secures His supremacy:

What God the Father beholds as he looks out across the panorama of his own perfections in the Person of his Son is an all-satisfying scene of infinite wisdom, love, and power. Thus his happiness flows from his perfections, including the perfection of his infinite power. It is this immeasurable power that guarantees the freedom of God's delight in all that he does. His delight is the joy that he has in the reflection of his own glory in the person of his Son. But part of that glory is infinite power. And the unique function of his power is to make way for the overflow of his joy in the work of creation and redemption. It is his power that removes (in God's time and God's way) any obstacles to the accomplishment of his good pleasure. Thus the declaration that God does all that he pleases is a declaration of his power. This is what we mean by sovereignty – God's power always makes way for his perfections to be expressed according to his good pleasure.³⁸

As Piper states more simply, "God employs his sovereignty to display the great object of

³⁶Jonathan Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*, in Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, 140, 242.

³⁷Piper, *Desiring God*, 42.

³⁸Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 53.

his delight, his GLORY, and the beauty of his manifold perfections.”³⁹ Thus, God is not a frustrated God. His absolute sovereignty over the world allows Him to do anything He pleases in the joyful pursuit of His own glory.⁴⁰

Given this truth, what is man’s role in God’s pursuit of his own glory? To answer to this question, Piper refers back to the first two chapters of Genesis:

The biblical story of creation reaches its climax with the creation of man (male and female) in God’s image. Four things should be noted about this climactic act. (1) Man is created as the last of all God’s works and thus is the highest creature. (2) Only man is said to be in the image of God. (3) Only now that man is on the scene in the image of God does the writer describe the work of creation as being *very good* (1:31). (4) Man is given dominion and commanded to subdue and fill the earth (1:28).

What is man’s purpose here? According to the text, creation exists for man. But since God made man like himself, man’s dominion over the world and his filling the world is a display – an imaging forth – of God. God’s aim, therefore, was that man would so act that he mirror forth God, who has ultimate dominion. Man is given the exalted status of image-bearer not so he would become arrogant and autonomous (as he tried to do in the Fall), but so he would reflect the glory of his Maker whose image he bears. God’s purpose in creation, therefore, was to fill the earth with his own glory.⁴¹

Of course, Adam and Eve did rebel against God and ever since then, man in his sinful state has sought his own glory rather than God’s. However, according to God’s sovereign plan of redemption, Jesus came to die a sacrificial death to bring reconciliation. Yet even this act was primarily a testimony to God’s glory rather than a statement of man’s worth:

The purpose of Jesus’ death was to glorify the Father. To be willing as the Son of God to suffer the loss of so much glory himself in order to repair the injury done to God’s glory by our sin showed how infinitely valuable the glory of God is. To be sure, the death of Christ also shows God’s love for us. But we are not at the center.

God put forward his Son on the cross “*to show God’s righteousness, be-*

³⁹Piper, *Desiring God*, 42.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., 256.

cause in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Romans 3:25). In other words, by forgiving sin in the Old Testament and by tolerating many sinners, God had given the impression that his honor and glory were not of infinite worth. Now to vindicate the honor of his name and the worth of his glory, he required the death of his own Son. Thus Christ suffered and died for the glory of his Father. This demonstrates the righteousness of God, because God’s righteousness is his unswerving allegiance to uphold the value of his glory.⁴²

Subsequently, “God’s purpose for his new redeemed people, the church, is that our life goal should be to glorify God.”⁴³ Thus, all of history is about the joy of God in sovereignly demonstrating His supremacy by leading His creation to acknowledge His supremacy so that His people may join Him in the joy of His glory. In every regard, God’s goal is His glorification.

Given this understanding of God’s sovereignty and supremacy, this work will now turn to more fully delineating the evangelistic aspects of this particular theological tenet. There are five elements that particularly express the evangelistic impetus of the sovereignty and supremacy of God. They are the fame of God, the glory of Christ, Calvinism/election, the centrality of worship, and the role of prayer.

The Fame of God

When Piper speaks of God’s fame, he is basing his perspective on the scriptural fact that “God delights in having his name known.”⁴⁴ He notes,

The first and most important prayer that can be prayed is, “Hallowed be thy name.” This is a request to God that he would work to cause people to hallow his name. God loves to have more and more people “hallow” his name, and so his Son teaches Christians to put their prayers in line with this great passion of the Father. “Lord, cause more and more people to hallow your name,” that is,

⁴²Ibid., 264–65.

⁴³Ibid., 265.

⁴⁴Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 98.

esteem, admire, respect, cherish, honor, and praise his name. It is basically a missionary prayer. So the more I thought about it the more it seemed right to put the stress on fame and not just name. Fame means well-known name. His name is who he really is, especially, who he is for us. . . . He loves a worldwide reputation.⁴⁵

God's fame, therefore, is "the glory of God gone public."⁴⁶ Throughout the Old Testament, God repeatedly acts to preserve and extend His name, or fame, throughout the world (Joshua 2:10-11, 1 Samuel 12, Psalm 106:7-8, Isaiah 63:12-14, Exodus 9:16, etc.). For the sake of His name He had mercy on His people, He defeated great nations, and He displayed His love and mercy in amazing ways. God's pursuit of His fame was ultimately displayed in the gospel as Jesus came in the Father's name and acted for His glory (John 5:43, 10:25, 12:27-28, 17:26). Piper writes,

In the New Testament, the basis of all forgiveness of sins is revealed more clearly than it was in the Old Testament, but the basis in God's commitment to his name does not change. Paul teaches that the death of Christ demonstrated the righteousness of God in passing over sins and vindicated God's justice in justifying the ungodly who bank on Jesus and not themselves (Romans 3:25-26). In other words, Christ died once for all *to clear the name of God* in what looks like a gross miscarriage of justice – the acquittal of sinners simply for Jesus' sake. But Jesus died in such a way that forgiveness "for Jesus' sake" is the same as forgiveness "for the sake of God's name."⁴⁷

Thus, "The great ground of hope, the great motive to pray, the great wellspring of mercy is God's awesome commitment to his name. The pleasure that he has in his fame is the pledge and passion of his readiness to forgive and save those who lift his banner and cast themselves on his promise and mercy."⁴⁸

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., 101.

⁴⁷Ibid., 108.

⁴⁸Ibid., 107.

God's quest for His fame is therefore the central factor motivating world missions.

God's delight in Himself is manifested as more and more people delight in Him. Piper notes, "It is scarcely possible to overemphasize the centrality of the fame of God in motivating the mission of the church."⁴⁹ He continues,

The truth is plain: God is pursuing with omnipotent delight a worldwide purpose of gathering a people *for his name* from every tribe and language and nation (Revelation 5:9; 7:9). He has an inexhaustible enthusiasm for the fame of his name among the nations. Therefore when we bring our affections in line with his, and, for the sake of his name, renounce the quest for worldly comforts and join his global purpose, God's omnipotent commitment to his name is over us and we cannot lose, in spite of many tribulations (Acts 9:16; Romans 8:35-39).⁵⁰

Thus, God's love for His glory is manifested by the pursuit of His fame among the nations. He sovereignly acts throughout all redemptive history for the exaltation of His name.

The Glory of Christ

The role of Christ in God's providential plan has already been significantly treated in the earlier sections on the person of Christ and the nature of salvation, but further clarification is necessary at this point. Specifically, the question to be answered here concerns Christ's role in relation to God's supremacy and the Father's desire to glorify His name in redemption. Piper's understanding at this point is based upon his view of the Trinity. He notes, "The Christian Gospel is 'the gospel of the glory of Christ' because its final aim is that we should see and savor and show the glory of Christ. For this is none other than the glory of God. 'He is the radiance of His glory and the exact

⁴⁹Ibid., 118.

⁵⁰Ibid., 118-19.

representation of His nature' (Hebrews 1:3)."⁵¹ Speaking of Hebrews 1:3 and 2

Corinthians 4:4, Piper notes,

From these texts we learn that through all eternity God the Father has beheld the image of his own glory perfectly represented in the person of his Son. Therefore, one of the best ways to think about God's infinite enjoyment of his own glory is to think of it as the delight he has in his Son who is the perfect reflection of that glory (see John 17:24-26).⁵²

Once again, God is supreme because He is God; it then follows that Christ is also supreme because He is God. How is Christ's supremacy displayed and how does such a view fit with the fact that God the Father was "pleased" to put God the Son to death (Isa 53:10)?

Piper answers those questions in the following way:

When the Father forsook the Son and handed him over to the curse of the cross and lifted not a finger to spare him pain, he had not ceased to love the Son. In that very moment when the Son was taking upon himself everything that God hates in us, and God was forsaking him to death, even then the Father knew that the measure of his Son's suffering was the depth of his Son's love for the Father's glory. And in that love the Father took deepest pleasure. . .

When Jesus died, he glorified the Father's name and saved his Father's people. And since the Father has overflowing pleasure in the honor of his name, and since he delights with unbounded joy in the election of a sinful people for himself, how then shall he not delight in the bruising of his Son by which these two magnificent divine joys are reconciled and made one!⁵³

The missiological dimension hinted at in the above quote is made more clear in *Let the Nations Be Glad*. In this text, Piper's perspectives on God's supremacy, His quest for fame, and the glory of Christ are all combined to form the focus of salvation and the purpose of the church's mission:

The supremacy of God in missions is affirmed biblically by affirming the su-

⁵¹John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 22.

⁵²Piper, *Desiring God*, 44.

⁵³Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 176-77.

premacY of his Son, Jesus Christ. It is a stunning New Testament truth that since the incarnation of the Son of God all saving faith must henceforth fix on him. This was not always true. And those times were called the “times of ignorance” (Acts 17:30). But now it is true, and Christ is made the conscious center of the mission of the church. The aim of missions is to “bring about the obedience of faith *for the sake of his name* among all the nations” (Romans 1:5). This is a new thing with the coming of Christ. God’s will is to glorify his son by making him the conscious focus of all saving faith.⁵⁴

Thus, God the Father and God the Son are glorified and shown supreme in the act of redemption. The glory of Christ is the supreme revelation of the glory of God to all humanity through the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of the Son, and faith in Christ alone allows humanity to delight in that glory.

Calvinism/Election

As previously mentioned, Piper is an openly professing Calvinist. His conviction regarding Calvinism flows from his understanding of the supremacy of God in all things and his love for the clear teachings of Scripture:

Our experience is that clear knowledge of God from the Bible is the kindling that sustains the fires of affection for God. And probably the most crucial kind of knowledge is the knowledge of what God is like in salvation. That is what the five points of Calvinism are about. We do not begin as Calvinists and defend a system. We begin as Bible-believing Christians who want to put the Bible above all systems of thought. But over the years – many years of struggle – we have deepened in our conviction that Calvinistic teachings on the five points are Biblical and therefore true.⁵⁵

To facilitate understanding of Piper’s approach, it is beneficial at this point to address briefly his remarks on each of the five points as well as delineating the two points he has added.

⁵⁴Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 115.

⁵⁵John Piper, “TULIP: What The Pastoral Staff at Bethlehem Believe about the Five Points of Calvinism,” pamphlet distributed by Desiring God Ministries, Minneapolis, 2000, 1.

First, man is totally depraved in his natural condition apart from God.

Depravity is man's condition primarily in relation to God and secondarily in relation to man. Piper notes, "Unless we start here we will never grasp the totality of our natural depravity."⁵⁶ This state of man will be treated more fully in the next section on the depraved affections of man. Second, regarding irresistible grace, Piper notes that this doctrine "does not mean that every influence of the Holy Spirit cannot be resisted. It means that the Holy Spirit can overcome all resistance and make his influence irresistible."⁵⁷ He elaborates, "irresistible grace refers to the sovereign work of God to overcome the rebellion of our hearts and bring us to faith in Christ so that we can be saved. If our doctrine of total depravity is true, there can be no salvation without the reality of irresistible grace."⁵⁸

Third, Piper provides a very compelling argument for what is often the most controversial of the five points: limited atonement. Because this point is the most debated element of Calvinism, more extensive treatment is warranted here. In addressing this doctrine, both the extent and the nature of the atonement must be treated:

If you say that he [Christ] died for every human being in the same way, then you have to define the nature of the atonement very differently than you would if you believed that Christ only died for those who actually believe. In the first case you would believe that the death of Christ did not actually save anybody; it only made all men savable. It did not actually remove God's punitive wrath from anyone, but instead created a place where people could come and find mercy – if they could accomplish their own new birth and bring themselves to faith without the irresistible grace of God.

⁵⁶Ibid., 5.

⁵⁷Ibid., 9. Piper rearranges the order of the five points from TULIP to TILUP because he feels it is easier to teach the points in classes when they are addressed in the order that human beings experience them (See p. 4 of this same source).

⁵⁸Ibid.

For if Christ died for all men in the same way, then he did not purchase regenerating grace for those who are saved. They must regenerate themselves and bring themselves to faith. Then and only then do they become partakers of the benefits of the cross.

In other words, if you believe that Christ died for all men in the same way, then the benefits of the cross cannot include the mercy by which we are brought to faith, because then all men would be brought to faith, but they aren't. But if the mercy by which we are brought to faith (irresistible grace) is not part of what Christ purchased on the cross, then we are left to save ourselves from the bondage of sin, the hardness of heart, the blindness of corruption, and the wrath of God.

Therefore it becomes evident that it is not the Calvinist who limits the atonement. It is the Arminian, because he denies that the atoning death of Christ accomplishes what we most desperately need – namely, salvation from the condition of deadness and hardness and blindness under the wrath of God. The Arminian limits the nature and value and effectiveness of the atonement so that he can say that it was accomplished even for those who die in unbelief and are condemned. In order to say that Christ died for all men in the same way, the Arminian must limit the atonement to a powerless opportunity for men to save themselves from the terrible plight of depravity.

On the other hand, Calvinists do not limit the power and effectiveness of the atonement. We simply say that in the cross God had in view the actual redemption of his children. And we affirm that when Christ died for these, he did not just create the opportunity for them to save themselves, but really purchased for them all that was necessary to get them saved, including the grace of regeneration and the gift of faith. . . . [extensive treatment of scriptures] . . .

We can conclude this section with the following summary argument. Which of these statements is true?

1. Christ died for some of the sins of all men.
2. Christ died for all the sins of some men.
3. Christ died for all the sins of all men.

No one says that the first is true, for then all would be lost because of the sins that Christ did not die for. The only way to be saved from sin is for Christ to cover it with his blood.

The third statement is what the Arminians would say. Christ died for all the sins of all men. But then why are not all saved? They answer, Because some do not believe. But is this unbelief not one of the sins for which Christ died? If they say yes, then why is it not covered by the blood of Jesus and all unbelievers saved? If they say no (unbelief is not a sin that Christ has died for) then they must say that men can be saved without having all their sins atoned for by Jesus, or they must join us in affirming statement number two: Christ died for all the sins of some men. That is, he died for the unbelief of the elect so that God's punitive wrath is appeased toward them and his grace is free to draw them irresistibly out of darkness into his marvelous light.⁵⁹

⁵⁹Ibid., 13-14, 17-18.

The fourth point treated by Piper is unconditional election, and it is specifically the topic of election that receives the most attention in Piper's writings. He affirms unconditional nature of election by noting that there is no condition man must meet, or for that matter, can meet, before God chooses to save him. Election is solely God's sovereign choice of individuals. He does, however, offer an important clarification: "We are not saying that final salvation is unconditional. It is not. We must meet the condition of faith in Christ in order to inherit eternal life. But faith is not a condition for election. Just the reverse. Election is a condition for faith."⁶⁰

In contrast to the man-centered concern for individual freedom of will, Piper concentrates on God's sovereign freedom in election. From the calling of Abram and onward through history, God has demonstrated His freedom of choice in His governance of creation and particularly of man. Without regard to the individual or their works, God elects to salvation the "babes" of the world for the exaltation of His glory and for the humbling of mankind. Piper writes:

God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are so devoted to exalting God the Father that they rejoice when he exerts his wisdom and power and grace to choose a people for himself in a way that will confound all the man-centered expectations of the world. The wise are passed over in their pride and the babes, the unlikely, the helpless, are surprised with the sovereign freedom of divine favor. The tables are turned from what the world expects. The wisdom of man is put down. And the freedom of God's grace is exalted when the prime candidates of the world are passed over and God surprises everyone with his choice of the babes. This is what make Jesus and the Holy Spirit rejoice – the humbling of human pride and the exaltation of God's freedom and grace.⁶¹

He continues, "God elects, predestines, and secures for one great ultimate purpose – that the glory of his grace might be praised forever and ever with white-hot affection. This is

⁶⁰Ibid., 19.

⁶¹Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 135.

why God delights in election. It is the great first work of free grace that takes away the final refuge of human self-reliance and casts man on the unshakable Rock of covenant love.⁶²

It is also important to recognize the manner in which Christ is glorified in election. Speaking of Romans 8:29, Piper notes that there are two goals of predestination:

The first goal of our predestination is to be like Christ. This includes new resurrection bodies of glory like his (Philippians 3:21; 1 Corinthians 15:49). But most importantly, it includes spiritual and moral qualities and capacities like Christ's (1 John 3:2-3).

The second and more ultimate goal of our predestination is "that Christ might be the first-born among many brethren." In other words, God aims to surround his Son with living images of himself so that the preeminent excellency of the original will shine the more brightly in his images. The goal of predestination is (1) our delight in becoming holy as he is holy and (2) his delight in being exalted as preeminent over all in the midst of a transformed, joyful people.⁶³

Thus, election/predestination includes a significant Christological motive as God seeks the fullest display of His glory.

This doctrine of election has key missiological significance because it provides the impetus for and insures the success of the missionary task. Piper writes:

Evangelism and missions are not imperiled by the biblical truth of election, but empowered by it, and their triumph is secured by it. Jesus said, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice" (John 10:16). This means that there are elect sheep scattered throughout the world (John 11:52). They will be there among "every people, language, tribe and nation" when the missionary arrives to issue God's absolutely essential call through the gospel (Revelation 5:9). Therefore Jesus says he *must* bring them in. And he says they *will* heed his voice. In other words, the triumph of the ingathering of world missions is a certainty because of the truth of election: he does have other sheep.⁶⁴

⁶²Ibid., 138.

⁶³Piper, *Desiring God*, 118.

⁶⁴Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 153.

Thus, election is both a biblical doctrine and a God-glorifying truth through which the supremacy of God is displayed in His sovereign freedom of choice.

The final of the original five points of Calvinism is perseverance of the saints. Here Piper espouses the common evangelical view that those who are truly elect will persevere along with the corollary truth that only those who persevere are truly elect.⁶⁵ To these original five points of Calvinism, Piper adds two more thoughts that flow from Calvinistic thought. Thus he sometimes refers to himself as a “Seven Point Calvinist” in comical fashion. The first of these two thoughts flows logically from unconditional election. Piper holds that “just as God chooses whom He will save without regard to any distinctives in the person, so also He decides whom He will not save without regard to any distinctives in the individual.”⁶⁶ He thereby avoids the perils of the double-predestination perspective while still affirming that “God ordains not only that some will be rescued from his judgement, but that others will undergo that judgement.”⁶⁷ The second thought flowing from Calvinism is what Piper calls the “best-of-all-possible worlds.” With this point he contends “that God governs the course of history so that, in the long run, His glory will be more fully displayed and his people more fully satisfied that would have been the case in any other world.”⁶⁸ He continues,

If we look only at the way things are now in the present era of this fallen world, this is not the best-of-all-possible worlds. But if we look at the whole course of

⁶⁵Piper, “TULIP,” 23-26.

⁶⁶“What Does John Piper Mean When He Says That He Is a ‘Seven Point’ Calvinist?” [on-line]; accessed 2 September 2002; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/library/theological_qa/calvinism/seven_points.html; Internet.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

history, from creation to redemption to eternity and beyond, and see the entirety of God's plan, it is the best-of-all-possible plans and leads to the best-of-all-possible eternities. And therefore this universe (and the events that happen in it from creation into eternity, taken as a whole) is the best-of-all-possible worlds.⁶⁹

With his espousal of five-point Calvinism, Piper affirms the absolute sovereignty of God over creation and especially over humanity. A large number of evangelicals today tend to affirm the sovereignty of God except when it comes to the issue of salvation. However, as Piper so aptly points out, the authority of Scripture and the glory of God are defamed where the truth of election is denied. God's supremacy over creation, over humanity, and over the church is demonstrated through these truths. Man's response to God should be humble thankfulness and the willingness to join Him in spreading His glory through missions so that His other sheep may be brought in.

The Centrality of Worship

In one sense, the idea of worship fits very well as a descriptive of the last of the four tenets: the glorifying witness of the church. It is included under the first tenet, however, because worship is the natural delight of the heart that has come to a settled conclusion regarding the supremacy of God. It is "a way of gladly reflecting back to God the radiance of his worth."⁷⁰ Piper states,

The fuel of worship is a true vision of the greatness of God; the fire that makes the fuel burn white hot is the quickening of the Holy Spirit; the furnace made alive and warm by the flame of truth is our renewed spirit; and the resulting heat of our affections is powerful worship, pushing its way out in confessions, longings, acclamations, tears, songs, shouts, bowed heads, lifted hands, and obedient lives.⁷¹

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Piper, *Desiring God*, 81.

⁷¹Ibid., 77.

As already noted previously, mankind was created to glorify God. Once redeemed from their sinful state, God's children are brought back to this key purpose for their lives. The fulfillment of this purpose culminates in the act of worship as the Christian's heart and mind are consumed with the joy that comes from being focused upon the manifold excellencies of God. As Piper notes, "Worship is an end in itself because it is the final end for which we were created."⁷²

The emotions and affections of worship cannot be overlooked at this point. They too are ends in themselves because in the act of worship they are set wholly upon God. Piper explains,

Someone might object that in making the joy of worship an end in itself, we make God a means to our end rather than our being a means to his end. Thus we seem to elevate ourselves above God. But consider the question: Which glorifies God more – that is, which reflects back to God more clearly the greatness of his glory – (1) a worship experience that comes to climax with joy in the wonder of God, or (2) an experience that comes to climax in a noble attempt to free itself from rapture in order to make a contribution to the goal of God?

This is a subtle thing. We strive against God's all-sufficient glory if we think we can become a means to *his* end without making joy in him *our* end. Christian Hedonism does not put us above God when it makes the joy of worship its goal. It is precisely in confessing our frustrated, hopeless condition without him that we honor him. A patient is not greater than his doctor because he longs to be made well. A child is not greater than his father when he wants the fun of playing together with him.

On the contrary, the one who actually sets himself above God is the person who presumes to come to God to give rather than get. With a pretense of self-denial he positions himself as God's benefactor – as if the world and all it contains were not already God's (Psalm 50:12)!

No, the hedonistic approach to God in worship is the only humble approach because it is the only one that comes with empty hands. Christian Hedonism pays God the respect of acknowledging (and really feeling!) That he alone can satisfy the heart's longing to be happy. Worship is an end in itself because we glorify God *by* enjoying him forever.⁷³

⁷²Ibid., 84.

⁷³Ibid., 85.

Thus, true worship is grounded in the nature and character – the supremacy – of God. As Christians realize that God alone offers ultimate satisfaction, purpose, and happiness, worship is the result. In worship, the believer joins his mind and emotions with God in His ultimate purpose: the glorification of His name. The supremacy of God is not only the foundation and starting point for worship, it is also the final purpose of worship.

Piper does not allow worship just to be about emotions and affections, however. He balances his approach with a strong focus on truth:

I must balance the scales and reassert that true worship always combines heart and head, emotion and thought, affection and reflection, doxology and theology.

“True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.” True worship does not come from people whose feelings are like air ferns with no root in the solid ground of biblical doctrine. The only affections that honor God are those rooted in the rock of biblical truth. . . . Strong affections for God, rooted in and shaped by the truth of scripture – this is the bone and marrow of biblical worship.

Therefore Christian Hedonism is passionately opposed to all attempts to drive a wedge between deep thought and deep feeling. It rejects the common notion that profound reflection dries up fervent affection. It resists the assumption that intense emotion thrives only in the absence of coherent doctrine.

On the contrary, Christian Hedonists are persuaded with Edwards that the only affections that magnify God’s value are those which come from true apprehensions of his glory. If the feast of worship is rare in the land, it is because there is a famine of the Word of God (Amos 8:11-12).⁷⁴

Worship, therefore, is “fervent affection” founded in and informed by biblical revelation.

The question to answer next concerns the manner in which worship fuels missions. How does heart-felt recognition and enjoyment of God’s supremacy in all things drive evangelism? Piper is very explicit on this matter:

The ultimate foundation for our passion to see God glorified is his own passion to be glorified. God is central and supreme in his own affections. There are no rivals for the supremacy of God’s glory in his own heart. God is not an idolater. He does not disobey the first and greatest commandment. With all his

⁷⁴Ibid., 90-92.

heart and soul and strength and mind he delights in the glory of his manifold perfections. The most passionate heart for God in all the universe is God's heart.

This truth, more than any other I know, seals the conviction that worship is the fuel and goal of missions. The deepest reason why our passion for God should *fuel* missions is that God's passion for God fuels missions. Missions is the overflow of our delight in God because missions is the overflow of God's delight in being God. And the deepest reason why worship is the *goal* in missions is that worship is God's goal. We are confirmed in this goal by the biblical record of God's relentless pursuit of praise among the nations. "Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples!" (Psalm 117:1). If it is God's goal it must be our goal.

All my years of preaching and teaching on the supremacy of God in the heart of God have proved that this truth hits most people like a truck laden with unknown fruit. If they survive the impact, they discover that it is the most luscious fruit on the planet.⁷⁵

Because God's glory is His goal, His desire is to gather in His worshipers from all over the earth. He has chosen to accomplish this ingathering through those who are already passionate worshipers. Through their fervor and love for God, they proclaim and bear witness to the infinite value of God and the glorious redemption accomplished through His Son, thereby becoming vessels that the Holy Spirit uses to draw the elect to faith in almighty God.

The Role of Prayer

Like worship, prayer is an activity that could have been included under the fourth tenet, the glorifying witness of the church. In Piper's theology, however, prayer is not performed as a witness to others. He contends that prayer is actually a subset of worship because the One you call upon in prayer is the One who gets the glory.⁷⁶ He explains:

⁷⁵Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 15-16.

⁷⁶John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 8 October 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

Why then does God delight in the prayers of the upright? He delights in their prayers for the same reason that he abominates the sacrifices of the wicked – because the prayers of the upright are the extension and outworking of the heart; but, unlike the heart of the wicked, the heart of the upright magnifies the power and grace of God. The prayer of the upright is a delight to God because it expresses those affections of the heart which call attention to the all-sufficiency of God. . . . God loves to magnify his glory in the lives of his people. So he designed prayer as a way for this to happen. Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, *that the Father may be glorified in the Son*” (John 14:14). So God has designed prayer as an occasion when he and the Son will be glorified as the source and agent in doing good to his people. This is one of the reasons Revelation describes the prayers of the saints as golden bowls of incense before the throne of God (Revelation 5:8). God delights in the aroma of his own glory as he smells it in the prayers of his people.⁷⁷

Prayers offered up to God are ultimately a recognition of His supremacy in all things and his sovereignty over the entire universe. They are an acknowledgement of man’s weakness and need and an exaltation of God’s infinite wisdom and strength. In short, prayer is the believer’s expression of dependence upon God – and thus God is glorified in this expression of his sovereign sufficiency. Given this understanding, prayer is indeed an aspect of worship.

Piper balances the above perspective with the fact that prayer is also “the pursuit of our joy.” He writes,

The first reason, then, why prayer leads to fulness of joy is that prayer is the nerve center of our fellowship with Jesus. He is not here physically to see. But in prayer we speak to him just as though he were. And in the stillness of those sacred times we listen to his Word and we pour out to him our longings. . . . Prayer is God’s appointed way to fulness of joy because it is the vent of the inward burnings of our heart for Christ. If we had no vent, if we could not commune with him in response to his Word, we would be miserable indeed.

But there is a second reason prayer leads to joy’s fullness: It provides the power to do what we love to do, but can’t do without God’s help. The text says, “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” Receive what? What would bring us fulness of joy? Not a padded and protected and comfortable life. Rich people are as miserably unhappy as poor people. What we need in answer to prayer to fill our joy is the power to love. Or as John puts it, the power to

⁷⁷Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 215-16.

bear fruit. Prayer is the fountain of joy because it is the source of the power to love.⁷⁸

Thus, prayer is an expression of worship in that it magnifies the supremacy, sufficiency, and infinite worth of God while at the same time being an occasion where believers experience great joy, fulfillment, and empowerment as His needy children.

What is the role of prayer in missions and evangelism? The second chapter of *Let the Nations Be Glad* is an extensive answer to this question. Writing from a missiological perspective, Piper contends,

Life is war. That's not all it is. But it is always that. Our weakness in prayer is owing largely to our neglect of this truth. Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief. It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den. God has given us prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie so that we can call headquarters for everything we need as the kingdom of Christ advances in the world. Prayer gives *us* the significance of front-line forces, and gives *God* the glory of a limitless provider. The one who gives the power gets the glory. Thus prayer safeguards the supremacy of God in missions while linking us with endless grace for every need.⁷⁹

He continues, "This is why God has ordained prayer to have such a crucial place in the mission of the church. The purpose of prayer is to make clear to all the participants in this war that the victory belongs to the Lord."⁸⁰

In *The Pleasures of God*, Piper notes one further missiological aspect of prayer when he delineates the connection between election and prayer. He explains,

Prayer for the salvation of the lost is rooted in election. Prayer is one of God's appointed means of bringing the elect to faith. Thus God loves such prayers with the very passion that moved him to choose a people for his glory.

⁷⁸Piper, *Desiring God*, 150-51.

⁷⁹Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 41.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 55.

Until we embrace the sovereignty of God in election (and, therefore, in conversion), we cannot really pray consistently that God would actually save lost sinners. We cannot pray the way Paul describes his own praying in Romans 10:1, “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they might be saved.” Paul’s heart’s desire is for the salvation of his fellow Jews. And when our hearts ache for something, we pray for it. . . .

But that kind of praying is inconsistent if you do not believe in the sovereignty of God in election and conversion. The sovereignty of God is his right and power to save unbelieving, unrepentant, hardened sinners. There are a lot of people who do not believe God has that right. They do not believe that God has the right to intrude upon a person’s rebellion, and overcome it, and draw that person effectually to faith and salvation. . . . Instead they believe that man himself has the sole right of final determination in the choices and affections of his heart toward God. . . . And so it is finally in the hands of man, not God, who will be saved and how many will inhabit the kingdom. . . .

They can’t pray, “Open my sister’s eyes so that she will believe the gospel.” (Acts 16:14) The reason they can’t pray this way is that all these prayers give God a right they reserve for man – namely the ultimate, decisive determination of man’s destiny. If you ask God to do any of these things, he would be the one who actually saves.⁸¹

Prayer, therefore, is an act of worship whereby God’s supremacy is acknowledged out of man’s weakness and dependence. It is also critical for one’s joy in the relationship with God in that it allows for intimate fellowship with Christ. Finally, it is the power that wields the weapon of the Word as God advances His kingdom throughout all the earth, claiming His elect and displaying His greatness.

All five of the above tenets (the fame of God, the glory of Christ, Calvinism/election, the centrality of worship, and the role of prayer) form critical elements of Piper’s doctrine of the sovereignty and supremacy of God. They by no means exhaust all that Piper includes under the rubric of this particular theological tenet, but they do encapsulate the evangelistic particulars that flow from it. As noted earlier, this particular theological tenet is the proverbial “crown jewel” of Piper’s theology in that every other aspect of his doctrine either flows from or is related to the supremacy of God. This fact

⁸¹Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 217-18.

will be readily verified as the other tenets are now delineated.

The Depraved Affections of Man

This particular topic has already been touched upon in the previous section on the nature of man, but further treatment is necessary at this point. In accordance with his Calvinism, Piper espouses the doctrine of total depravity, but he is careful to define it in relationship to God. He writes, “The terrible condition of man’s heart will never be recognized by people who assess it only in relation to other men. Romans 14:23 makes plain that depravity is our condition in relation to God primarily, and only secondarily in relation to man. Unless we start here, we will never grasp the totality of our natural depravity.”⁸²

Total Depravity

Piper contends that man is totally depraved in four senses. First, man’s rebellion against God is total because “apart from the grace of God there is no delight in the holiness of God, and there is no glad submission to the sovereign authority of God.”⁸³

Piper notes,

Of course totally depraved men can be very religious and very philanthropic. They can pray and give alms and fast, as Jesus said (Matthew 6:1-8). But their very religion is rebellion against the rights of their Creator, if it does not come from a childlike heart of trust in the free grace of God. Religion is one of the chief ways that man conceals his unwillingness to forsake self-reliance and bank all his hopes on the unmerited mercy of God (Luke 18:9-14; Colossians 2:20-23).⁸⁴

Second, in this state of rebellion, everything man does is sin. Man can do “good” in the

⁸²Piper, *What We Believe about the Five Points of Calvinism*, 5.

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

sense that he is made in God's image and can perform acts that "conform to the external pattern of life that God has commanded in Scripture."⁸⁵ However, "in the service of man's self-justifying rebellion, these very things are sinful."⁸⁶ Here Piper cites Romans 14:23 which says, "Whatever is not from faith is sin." Thus, "apart from the work of God's Spirit, all we think and feel and do is not good."⁸⁷

Third, man's inability to submit to God and do good is total. According to Romans 8:7-8, man is completely enslaved to his flesh, unable to reform himself, and therefore cannot submit to God.⁸⁸ Fourth, man's rebellion is totally deserving of eternal punishment. Piper writes,

The reality of hell is God's clear indictment of the infiniteness of our guilt. If our corruption were not deserving of an eternal punishment, God would be unjust to threaten us with a punishment as severe as eternal torment. But the Scriptures teach that God is just in condemning unbelievers to eternal hell Therefore, to the extent that hell is a sentence of total condemnation, to that extent must we think of ourselves as totally blameworthy apart from the saving grace of God.⁸⁹

This doctrine of depravity is critical in understanding Piper's God-centered approach to evangelism. Once again, while many evangelicals have softened and even denied the complete sinfulness of man, he contends that espousing total depravity is necessary to properly appreciate God's glory in redemption:

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of admitting our condition to be this bad. If we think of ourselves as basically good or even less than totally at

⁸⁵Ibid., 6.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid., 7.

⁸⁹Ibid.

odds with God, our grasp of the work of God in redemption will be defective. But if we humble ourselves under this terrible truth of our total depravity, we will be in a position to see and appreciate the glory and wonder of the work of God discussed in the [other] four points [of Calvinism].⁹⁰

Depravity and “Affections”

It is important to note here that Piper takes an Edwardsian perspective on sin and depravity by addressing them in terms of affections and love. Speaking of Romans 3:23, he contends “Paul means that sinners have fallen short of *prizing* the glory of God. We have exchanged the glory of God for something else: for images of glory, like a new home or car or VCR or computers or vacation days or impressive resumes or whatever makes our ticker tick more than the wonder of God’s glory.”⁹¹ Thus, depravity is understood to be the sinful condition of man whereby his affections are set upon lesser objects or pleasures to satisfy himself apart from God. In so doing, he is not prizing the glory of God above all else.

This perspective flows from Edwards’ idea that the “very essence of human depravity is our bondage to ‘self-love.’”⁹² According to Edwards, there are two different types of “self-love.” The first is negative self-love, which he basically defines as narrow selfishness. People who are governed by this type of self love “place their happiness in good things which are confined or limited to themselves exclusive of others. And this is selfishness. This is the thing most directly intended by that self-love which the Scripture

⁹⁰Ibid., 8.

⁹¹Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 158.

⁹²Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 105.

condemns.”⁹³ This type of self-love was the result of the Fall. Piper notes, “in the Fall, that is, in original sin, the human heart shrank; it contracted to ‘an exceeding diminution and confinedness’; it forsook God and became the slave of private, narrow, limited self love.”⁹⁴

The second type of self-love is the neutral use of self-love, simply defined as the desire for happiness. Edwards notes, “It is not a thing contrary to Christianity that a man should love himself; or what is the same thing, that he should love his own happiness. Christianity does not tend to destroy a man’s love to his own happiness; it would therein tend to destroy the humanity That a man should love his own happiness, is necessary to his nature.”⁹⁵ As Piper notes, this second type of self-love “is neither good nor bad until some object is fastened upon – something that is liked and approved and pleasing. If the thing fastened on is evil, or the fastening on it is disproportionate to its true worth, then our being pleased by it is shown to be corrupt. But the sheer faculty of desiring and liking and approving and being pleased, or not, is neither virtuous nor evil.”⁹⁶

Understanding these two types of self-love is the key to understanding Edwards’, and thus Piper’s, view of the depraved affections of man. Piper explains,

So now, when we compare these two kinds of self-love, we can see more clearly what Edwards really regards as the essential evil of the human heart What is evil about self-love is not its desire to be happy – that is essential to our nature as creatures, whether fallen or not. What is evil about self-love is its finding happiness in such small, narrow, limited, confined reality, namely, the self

⁹³Ibid. Piper is here quoting from page 257 of Edwards’ *Charity and Its Fruits*.

⁹⁴Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 104.

⁹⁵Ibid., 105. This quotation is from Edwards’ *Charity and Its Fruits* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 254.

⁹⁶Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 106.

and all that makes much of the self. Our depravity is our being exactly the opposite of public-spirited. . . .

So what Edwards was trying to do in his definition of depravity – by focusing on the negative, narrow, confined, constricted sense of self-love – was to show, in the end, that *every* act of love performed without a supreme regard for God as the object of delight has no true virtue in it. In other words, his treatment of self-love, like everything else he wrote, was aimed at defending the centrality and supremacy of God in all things.⁹⁷

Edwards then takes these ideas a step further by noting that the neutral type of self-love is ultimately not spiritual, and it is therefore, in some sense, tainted by the selfish form of self-love. If, by some chance, a human being in search of virtue came to embrace God, it would be merely for the natural benefits God gives and not for the beauty of His glory in itself.⁹⁸ This unspiritual exercise of self-love “is an embracing of the self, and of God only inasmuch as he makes much of the self.”⁹⁹ Edwards writes,

This is . . . the difference between the joy of the hypocrite, and the joy of the true saint. The [hypocrite] rejoices in himself; self is the first foundation of his joy: the [true saint] rejoices in God. . . . True saints have their minds, in the first place, inexpressibly pleased and delighted with the sweet ideas of the glorious and amiable nature of the things of God. And this is the spring of all their delights, and the cream of all their pleasures. . . . But the dependence of the affections of hypocrites is in a contrary order: they first rejoice . . . that they are made so much of by God; and then on that ground, he seems in a sort, lovely to them.¹⁰⁰

Thus, man in his depravity would only seek God from that sense of narrow selfishness that is focused upon what he can get from God. As Piper notes, “Because of the Fall, self-love

⁹⁷Ibid., 107, 109.

⁹⁸Ibid., 110.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 110. Piper here quotes Edwards’ *The Religious Affections*, ed. by John Smith, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 249-250.

is blind and seared in its capacity to discern and delight in the glory of God.”¹⁰¹

What then makes the difference in “whether self-love embraces God for his gifts or for himself?”¹⁰² The answer to that question is regeneration – the “supernatural work of the Spirit of God in the soul, giving it a new capacity to see spiritual beauty and to savor the glory of God as something real and pleasurable in itself.”¹⁰³ Only the spiritual man can experience and delight in the reality of God in the manner intended at creation. As Piper states, “a capacity to taste a thing must precede our desire for its sweetness. That is, *regeneration* (or new birth) must precede the pursuit of happiness *in God*.”¹⁰⁴ This fact leads directly to a discussion of Piper’s view of conversion.

Conversion as the Creation of a Christian Hedonist

Given the truth that God created man for His glory, the fact that man has failed to glorify God because of sin, and the reality that God has overcome sin and exalted His glory through the sacrifice of His Son, the question to answer next concerns man’s response to the gospel. What is man’s role in fulfilling God’s elective purpose? Man’s response is summarized by the term “conversion,” and in Piper’s theology, true conversion is the creation of a Christian Hedonist.

Regeneration, Conversion, and Salvation

Piper defines conversion as “repentance (turning from sin and unbelief) and

¹⁰¹Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, 111.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

¹⁰³*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 112.

faith (trusting in Christ alone for salvation).¹⁰⁵ One cannot be expressed without the other, and both point to the fact that saving faith “always involves a profound change of heart, not merely agreement with the truth of a doctrine.”¹⁰⁶ Piper is quick to point out, however, that something very important precedes conversion. He notes, “Repentance and faith are our work. But we will not repent and believe unless God does his work to overcome our hard and rebellious hearts. This divine work is called *regeneration*.”¹⁰⁷ He elaborates,

Conversion does indeed include an act of will by which we renounce sin and submit ourselves to the authority of Christ and put our hope and trust in him. We are responsible to do this, and will be condemned if we don’t. But just as clearly the Bible teaches that, owing to our hard heart and willful blindness and spiritual insensitivity, we cannot do this.

We must first experience the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. . . . Therefore conversion involves a miracle of new birth. Thus new birth precedes and enables faith and repentance. . . . By the miracle of new birth, by pure grace, God grants us the inclination we need.¹⁰⁸

Regeneration is thus a condition for conversion, and conversion, in turn, is a condition for salvation. A proper understanding of salvation, however, is critical:

If “salvation” refers to new birth, conversion is *not* a condition of it. New birth comes first and enables the repentance and faith of conversion. Before new birth we are dead, and dead men don’t meet conditions. Regeneration is totally unconditional. It is owing solely to the free grace of God. “It does not depend on the one who wills or runs, but on God who has mercy” (Romans 9:16). We get no credit. He gets all the glory.

But if “salvation” refers to our future deliverance from the wrath of God at the judgment and entrance into eternal life, then yes, conversion is a condition of salvation. When we cry, “What must I do to be saved?” we are asking how to be forgiven for sin, and have fellowship with God and escape from the wrath to

¹⁰⁵Piper, *Desiring God*, 61.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

come. The answer is always, Meet the condition: Be converted! . . . [and] conversion is no mere human decision. It is a human decision. But oh, so much more! Repentant faith (or believing repentance) is based on an awesome miracle performed by the sovereign God. It is the breath of a new creature in Christ.¹⁰⁹

Thus, the final result of salvation is accomplished by God sovereignly working in accordance with His elective purposes to regenerate and bring about repentant faith. With these views, Piper places himself alongside of other evangelical Calvinists. When he speaks of the character of conversion, however, he sets himself apart as a distinct Christian Hedonist.

Christian Hedonism as True Christianity

Basing his views upon Matthew 13:44 (the parable of the treasure in the field), Piper states, “Conversion is what happens to the heart when Christ becomes for us a treasure chest of holy joy.”¹¹⁰ This perspective leads Piper to often speak of having Christ as one’s “treasure” instead of the commonly used designation “savior.” The treasure is “the fellowship of God in Christ,” and being willing to forsake everything else to acquire this treasure is what Piper calls being “deeply converted.”¹¹¹ In true hedonistic fashion, Piper looks at scriptures like Hebrews 11:6 and notes that the faith that pleases God is the faith that desires the reward of His all-satisfying presence. This kind of faith realizes that in Him is found the heart’s eternal delight. But how does one desire something so strongly when they have never tasted it before? Quite simply, before the act of faith, a

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 64-65.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 66.

¹¹¹Ibid.

new taste is created.¹¹² In regeneration, “a taste for the glory of God and the beauty of Christ” is implanted in the soul. Piper explains,

Once we had no delight in God, and Christ was just a vague historical figure. What we enjoyed was food and friendships and productivity and investments and vacations and hobbies and games and reading and shopping and sex and sports and art and TV and travel. . . but not God. He was an idea – even a good one – and a topic for discussion; but he was not a treasure of delight.

Then something miraculous happened. It was like the opening of the eyes of the blind during the golden dawn. First the stunned silence before the unspeakable beauty of holiness. Then a shock and terror that we had actually loved the darkness. Then the settling stillness of joy that this is the soul’s end. The quest is over. We would give anything if we might be granted to live in the presence of this glory forever and ever.

And then, faith – the confidence that Christ has made a way for me, a sinner, to live in his glorious fellowship forever, the confidence that if I come to God through Christ, he will give me the desire of my heart to share his holiness and behold his glory.

But before the confidence comes the craving. Before decision comes delight. Before trust comes the discovery of treasure.¹¹³

Thus, a Christian Hedonist (a true Christian) is created with the regenerative “awakening of an irresistible thirst for Christ.”¹¹⁴ Piper is adamant about this perspective of the Christian life. He writes, “The pursuit of joy in God is not optional. It is not an ‘extra’ that a person might grow into after he comes to faith. Until your heart has hit upon this pursuit, your ‘faith’ cannot please God. It is not saving faith.”¹¹⁵ He continues, “Saving faith is the heartfelt conviction not only that Christ is reliable, but also that he is desirable. It is the confidence that he will come through with his promises *and* that what he promises

¹¹²Ibid., 67.

¹¹³Ibid., 67-68.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

is more to be desired than all the world.”¹¹⁶ This “joy of faith” has three levels:

First, there is the new spiritual taste created by the Spirit of God for the glory of God. This new taste is the seed and root of joy. . . . Second, there is the shoot, the stem, of faith itself reaching out actively for all that God is for us in Christ. The pith of this stem is joy in God. It is not possible for vital, genuine faith in the Fountain of Joy not to partake of that joy. Joyless embracing of the God of hope, for who he really is, is impossible. Third, there is the fruit of daily gladness that Paul speaks of in Romans 15:13, “May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace *in believing*.” Here joy and peace flow out *from* faith into the whole of life.¹¹⁷

In Piper’s system of thought, joy in God is the basis of, the motive of, and the fruit of true conversion. Having Christ as one’s “treasure,” as one’s supreme joy and delight, is the nature of true saving faith. This fact flows from and relates directly back to the main premise of his theology and ministry: “The chief end of God is to glorify God and enjoy his glory forever. Since his glory is magnified most in the God-centered passions of his joyful people, God’s self-exultation and our jubilation are one.”¹¹⁸

The Glorifying Witness of the Church

The fourth and final theological tenet to be discussed in this work is of a different character than the previous three. The first three dealt primarily with God and man: what sovereign, all-sufficient God has done to bring sinful, rebellious man to Himself for the greater display of His glory. This final theological tenet is different in that it assesses the role of the church, the fellowship of the redeemed, in serving as God’s instrument for the exaltation of His glory through the reaching of the nations. Worship and prayer were discussed in the context of the sovereignty and supremacy of God

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 219.

because, even though they are the joyful engagements of the redeemed, these two practices ultimately flow from and serve to magnify the sovereignty, supremacy, and sufficiency of God.

In discussing this fourth tenet, one preliminary matter must be explained. In speaking of the role of the church in God's plan, Piper is quick to point out that the church does not do work for God, but that God does His work through the church. This distinction is important. Piper's God-centered theological perspectives and careful examination of Scripture have led him to encourage people not to serve God unless He is served in the proper manner.¹¹⁹ He contends that serving God is not a matter of Christians putting their power at God's disposal for His good. He is all-sufficient and does not need "help." Christians must believe His promises, walk by faith, and live in obedience so that His power is at their disposal for their good.¹²⁰ He explains,

What is God looking for in the world? Assistants? No. The gospel is not a help-wanted ad. It is a help-available ad. Nor is the call to Christian service a help-wanted ad. God is not looking for people to work for Him but people who let Him work mightily in and through them: "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him" (2 Chron. 16:9). God is not a scout looking for the first draft choices to help His team win. He is an unstoppable fullback ready to take the ball and run touchdowns for anyone who trusts Him to win the game.¹²¹

Given that preliminary understanding, the fourth tenet can now be treated in full. In accordance with the sermon he preached in 1983 that began a missions awakening at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Piper's theology decrees that missions is indeed the battle

¹¹⁹John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 39.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 43.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 40.

cry of Christian Hedonism. It follows that if missions is the battle cry of Christian Hedonism, then it is the battle cry of the true church. The Great Commission bears out the simple fact that Christians have a God-ordained role in world evangelization. They have been entrusted with the witness that God will use to gather in His sheep. Piper even defines missions as “the Christian church’s ongoing effort to carry on Paul’s strategy: preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and planting his church among groups of people who have not yet been reached.”¹²² He continues, “My assumption is that people without the gospel are without hope, because only the gospel can free them from their sin. Therefore missions is utterly essential in the life of a loving church.”¹²³

That final statement says much: missions is “utterly essential” in the life of a “loving church.” The implications of this statement are critical. To be indifferent to missions and evangelism is to be an unloving church; indifference to evangelism is indifference to God’s desire to make His glory known, indifference to the call to love others, and indifference to the Great Commission. Though Piper has not written much that defines the nature and role of the church, this one fact is evident in his writing and preaching. The church exists to glorify God, and one of the main ways He is glorified is through the passionate witness of His people as they demonstrate and proclaim the joy, delight, and satisfaction that is found only in Him. Thus, in the exploration of this tenet, the goal is to understand the evangelistic elements embodied by the church that is firmly grounded in Christian Hedonism. Aside from fervent worship and militant prayer, they are driven by the joy of love, they demonstrate a missionary passion, and they embrace

¹²²Ibid., 191.

¹²³Ibid.

suffering.

Prior to addressing those three elements, however, one aspect of the role of the church will be briefly treated. Though it is not what this author would call a primary element of the glorifying witness of the church, the financial responsibility of Christians in building the kingdom does merit mentioning. In Piper's understanding, money is "the currency of Christian Hedonism"¹²⁴ and is therefore entrusted to Christians to be used for God's glory. Material possessions are a stewardship given by God to serve temporal purposes. In and of themselves, they offer no true fulfillment. Therefore, they should be gladly spent and forsaken for the greater treasure that is Christ. Given this truth, Piper calls Christians to live simple lives, thereby freeing their temporal resources to be used for eternal purposes; purposes like world evangelization:

We should be content with the simple necessities of life because we could invest the extra we make for what really counts. Three billion people today are outside Jesus Christ. Two-thirds of them have no viable Christian witness in their culture. If they are to hear – and Christ commands that they hear – then cross-cultural missionaries will have to be sent and paid for. All the wealth needed to send this new army of good news ambassadors is already in the church.

If we, like Paul, are content with the simple necessities of life, hundreds of millions of dollars in the church would be released to take the gospel to the frontiers. The revolution of joy and freedom it would cause at home would be the best local witness imaginable. . . . God is not glorified when we keep for ourselves (no matter how thankfully) what we ought to be using to alleviate the misery of unevangelized, uneducated, unmedicated, and unfed millions.¹²⁵

In short, the Christian's and the church's priorities are reflected by their financial management. If God's glory is of primary importance, resources are spent to magnify His name globally.

¹²⁴Piper, *Desiring God*, 159.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 163, 169.

Love

When delineating Piper's views on Christian love, much of the discussion is rooted in the material presented earlier on his theological development. Love is basically what Piper terms "horizontal hedonism" in the sense that it is the overflow of joy in God.¹²⁶ Drawing primarily from 2 Corinthians 8, Piper notes that the nature of genuine love can be seen in four truths:

1. Love is a work of divine grace. The willingness to love is put into the heart by God.
2. This experience of grace brings about a joy in God.
3. This incredible joy in God's grace overflows into a horizontal liberality toward men.
4. The manner in which the overflow of joy is expressed is in the joy of giving.¹²⁷

As a result of these four truths, Piper defines love as "the overflow of joy in God which gladly meets the needs of others."¹²⁸ He continues, "It is not duty for duty's sake, or right for right's sake. It is not a resolute abandoning of one's own good with a view solely to the good of the other person. It is first a deeply satisfying experience of the fullness of God's grace, and then a doubly satisfying experience of sharing that grace with another person."¹²⁹ Conversely, when people seek to express love without motive of joy, they tread the path to sin. He writes,

If you try to abandon the pursuit of your full and lasting joy, you cannot love people or please God. If love is the overflow of joy in God which gladly meets

¹²⁶Ibid., 97, 102.

¹²⁷Ibid., 102-3.

¹²⁸Ibid., 103.

¹²⁹Ibid.

the needs of others, then to abandon the pursuit of *this* joy is to abandon the pursuit of love! And if God is pleased by cheerful givers, then to abandon the pursuit of *this* cheerfulness sets you on a course where God takes no delight. If we are indifferent to whether we do a good deed cheerfully, we are indifferent to what pleases God. For God loves a cheerful giver.

Therefore it is essential that we be Christian Hedonists on the horizontal level in our relationships with other people and not just on the vertical axis in our relationship with God. If love is the overflow of joy in God that gladly meets the needs of other people, and if God loves such joyful givers, then this joy in giving is a Christian duty, and the effort not to pursue it is sin.¹³⁰

Thus, in stark contrast to modern notions of love, Piper contends that love is primarily a feeling seeking action, not just sacrificial action. Actual deeds of love are critical and efforts to love must be made even when joy is absent, but “an act does not qualify as love unless it involves the right motives.”¹³¹

Not only does love seek the joy of the beloved, it rejoices in the joy of the beloved and delights to contemplate joy in others. Speaking again from 2 Corinthians, Piper examines 1:23 through 2:4 and notes that the Corinthians’ joy was Paul’s joy and that Paul’s joy was the Corinthians’ joy. He states, “Love abounds between us when your joy is mine and my joy is yours. I am not loving just because I seek your joy, but because I seek it as *mine*.”¹³² Piper then combines the treatment of 1 Corinthians 8 with his treatment of 1 Corinthians 2 to draw one further conclusion:

Love not only delights to cause joy in those who are empty (2 Corinthians 8), but also delights to contemplate joy in those who are full (2 Corinthians 2). And these two delights are not at all in contradiction. The grace of God delights to grant repentance (2 Timothy 2:25) *and* it rejoices over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7). Therefore when our hearts are filled with joy in the grace of God, we not only want to cause the joy of others, but also to contemplate it when it exists in others.

¹³⁰Ibid., 104.

¹³¹Ibid., 101.

¹³²Ibid., 105-6.

So it is not inconsistent to say love is the overflow of joy in God that gladly meets the needs of others, *and* to say love is finding your joy in the joy of another. If love is the *labor* of Christian Hedonism which delights to beget its joy in others, then it is also the *leisure* of Christian Hedonism which delights to behold this joy begotten in others.¹³³

Thus, the motive for love is one's own pleasure, yet the hedonist also seeks the blessings and rewards that come through the expression of love.

Piper contends that love's deed and rewards are "organically related,"¹³⁴ and that the pursuit of rewards is a valid motive for the expression of love. At this point, some charge that the quest for reward turns love into a mercenary affair, but he responds by deferring to C. S. Lewis. Lewis writes,

We must not be troubled by unbelievers when they say that this promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward which has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man a mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it. A general who fights well in order to get a peerage is mercenary; a general who fights for victory is not, victory being the proper reward of battle as marriage is the proper reward of love. The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.¹³⁵

Commenting on Lewis' view, Piper continues,

Any act of love we choose for the sake of a holy reward must compel us because we see in that act the moral traits of that promised reward. Or to put it the other way around, the only fitting reward for an act of love is the experience of divine glory whose moral dimension is what made the chosen act attractive. . . . So in true Christian Hedonism there is an organic relationship between the love Christ commands and the reward he promises. It is never a mercenary affair in which we do what we despise to get what we enjoy. Jesus illustrates this connection

¹³³Ibid., 106.

¹³⁴Ibid., 117.

¹³⁵Ibid., 108. Piper here is quoting C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2.

between act and reward in Luke 6:35 Even though we should not care about human reward (“expecting nothing in return”), the Lord himself gives us an incentive to love by promising his reward, namely, that we will be sons of the Most High. This sonship implies likeness (“for he is kind to the ungrateful”). So the command and the reward are one piece of fabric. The command is to love. The reward is to become like one who loves.

So it is important to emphasize on the one hand that the reward a Christian Hedonist pursues is the incomparable delight of being like God and loving what he loves with an intensity approaching his own (John 17:26). And it is important to emphasize on the other hand that the acts of love which a Christian Hedonist performs are themselves therefore delightful in measure, because they have about them the aroma of this final reward. This, as we saw, was also C. S. Lewis’s point when he spoke of an activity’s “proper rewards” which “are the activity itself in consummation.”¹³⁶

Up to this point, basically three aspects of love have been delineated. First, Piper defined love as the overflow of joy in God which gladly meets the needs of others. Second, it was shown that for the Christian Hedonist, love is not only a joyful labor, but a joyful leisure. In other words, as love is actuated, the joy of the beloved is the joy of the lover. Third, the command to love and the reward of love are inseparable and flow from “the incomparable delight of being like God and loving what he loves with an intensity approaching his own.”¹³⁷ Simply stated, being like God is the basis of the command to love and the substance of the reward of loving. Before each of these aspects of love are related back to evangelism and missions, however, the fourth aspect of love must be treated.

Piper makes a final, critical point in his treatment of love as he answers the question, “What is the psychological process that moves from joy in God to the actual deed of love?”¹³⁸ The answer to this question lies in the fact that the true Christian longs

¹³⁶Piper, *Desiring God*, 117-19.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 119.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*

to be like the one he beholds. For example, “When the Holy Spirit awakens the heart of a person to delight in the holiness of God, an insatiable desire is born not only to *behold* that holiness but also to *be* holy as God is holy.”¹³⁹ How does this apply to love? He answers,

The holy greed for joy in God that wants to see and feel more and more manifestations of his glory will push a person into love. My desire to feel the power of God’s grace conquering the pride and selfishness in my life inclines me to behavior that demonstrates the victory of grace, namely love. Genuine love is so contrary to human nature that its presence bears witness to an extraordinary power. The Christian Hedonist pursues love because he is addicted to the experience of that power. He wants to feel more and more of the grace of God reigning in his life. . . . The all important difference between the non-Christian and the Christian Hedonist in this pursuit of joy is that the Christian Hedonist has discovered that self-confidence will never satisfy the longing of his heart to overcome finitude.

He has learned that what we are really made for is not the thrill of feeling our own power increase, but the thrill of feeling God’s power increase – conquering the precipices of un-love in our sinful hearts.¹⁴⁰

It is this final aspect of love that ties Piper’s whole perspective together and brings it to bear on the task of evangelism. Christian love is the impetus behind evangelism and missions because as the Christian loves out of the overflow of joy in God (aspect 1), and by loving increases his joy in the joy of another (aspect 2), he receives the craved for reward of godliness (aspect 3) and is driven to pursue more and more experiences of God’s grace and God’s awesome power (aspect 4). In short, the joyful experience of God’s grace results in a righteous greed for the manifest glory of God in the lives of fellow men. The joyous reward of this righteous greed is the progressive experience of God’s glory and the resultant growth into His likeness. Thus, love is the very heart and soul of the glorifying witness of the church. Piper explains,

When a person delights in the display of the glorious grace of God, that person will want to see as many displays of it as possible in other people. If I can be

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 119-20.

God's means of another person's miraculous conversion, I will count it all joy, because what would I rather see than another display of the beauty of God's grace in the joy of another person? My joy is doubled in his.

When the Christian Hedonist sees a person without hope or joy, that person's need becomes like a low-pressure zone approaching the high-pressure zone of joy in God's grace. In this spiritual atmosphere, a draft is created from the Christian Hedonist's high-pressure zone of joy to the low-pressure zone of need, as joy tends to expand to fill the need. That draft is called love.

Love is the overflow of joy in God that meets the needs of others. The overflow is experienced consciously as the pursuit of our joy in the joy of another. We double our delight in God as we expand it in the lives of others.¹⁴¹

Reflecting on Romans 10:1 and 1 Corinthians 10, Piper notes that Paul was a true Christian Hedonist that expressed this kind of love:

This is not the voice of disinterested benevolence! The salvation of others was the joy and passion of his life! When he denied himself comforts for this he was a Christian Hedonist, not a dutiful stoic. So the point of 1 Corinthians 10:24 and 33 is that we should not count any private comfort a greater joy than the joy of seeing our labor lead to another's salvation. . . . Love does not seek its own *private, limited* joy, but instead seeks its own joy in the good – the salvation and edification – of others.¹⁴²

Therefore, it is God's grace that is the source of love, and it is love that drives the Christian to meet the needs of others – particularly man's most desperate need: salvation. It is precisely this impulse to love that creates a missionary passion in the church.

Missionary Passion

In discussing this particular element, it is important to first understand the definition of missionary passion. Based upon the material in the previous section, this author defines missionary passion as a love for mankind manifested in a heart-consuming desire to see the glory and joy of God known among all the peoples of the earth. Having missionary passion does not necessarily mean one must literally be a missionary, but it

¹⁴¹Ibid., 120-21.

¹⁴²Ibid., 100.

does mean that one prioritizes his or her life in such a manner that reflects personal, fervent concern for world evangelization. Piper reflects this perspective when he encourages Christians to become what David Bryant calls “World Christians.” In the chapter in *Desiring God* entitled “Missions: The Battle Cry of Christian Hedonism,” Piper cites Bryant and notes that World Christians are those who say,

We want to accept personal responsibility for reaching some of earth’s unreached, especially from among the billions at the widest end of the Gap who can only be reached through major new efforts by God’s people. Among every people group where there is no vital, evangelizing Christian community there should be one, there must be one, there shall be one. Together we want to make this happen.¹⁴³

Driven by a love for God’s glory and the desire to meet man’s greatest need, world Christians (those with missionary passion) zealously love, pray, sacrifice, and proclaim so that others may know the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Based upon what Piper outlines in the chapter mentioned above, missionary passion is generally characterized by two items. First, it is characterized by an ultimate trust in the sovereignty of God in salvation. Proclaiming the gospel is the holy joy and responsibility of the Christian, but saving men is solely the work of God. Piper elaborates:

If God were not in charge of this affair, doing the humanly impossible, the missionary task would be hopeless. Who but God can raise the spiritually dead and give them an ear for the gospel? “Even when we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5). The great missionary hope is that when the gospel is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, God himself does what man cannot do – he creates the faith which saves. . . .

This is what man cannot do. It is impossible. Only God can take out the heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). Only God can draw people to the Son (John 6:44, 65). Only God can open the heart so that it gives heed to the gospel (Acts 16:14). Only the good shepherd knows his sheep by name. He calls them and they follow (John 10:3-4, 14). The sovereign grace of God, doing the humanly impossible, is the great missionary hope.

It is also the spring of life for the Christian Hedonist. For what the Christian

¹⁴³Ibid., 196. Piper is here quoting David Bryant, *In the Gap* (Madison: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 62.

Hedonist loves best is the experience of the sovereign grace of God filling him and overflowing him for the good of others. Christian Hedonist missionaries love the experience of “not I, but the grace of Christ which is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10). They bask in the truth that the fruit of their missionary labor is entirely of God (1 Corinthians 3:7, Romans 11:36). They feel only gladness when the Master says, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). They leap like lambs over the truth that God has taken the impossible weight of new creation off their shoulders and put it on his own.¹⁴⁴

Thus, one who exhibits a missionary passion lives by the complete confidence that God will use his or her efforts to save His sheep and bring them into His divine fold. It is a tremendous release to be able to go forward and know that one possesses the freedom to love through evangelism without bearing the burden of results.

The second characteristic of missionary passion is the willingness to sacrifice all that is necessary in the joyful pursuit of world evangelization. This fact flows from what Christ said in Mark 10:28-30. Here He promised that all who sacrificed for Him would receive back a hundredfold in this age and in the age to come. This confidence in Christ allows one to forsake any encumbrance in following the call of God, whether it is the loss of a family relationship due to one’s witness and beliefs or the loss of one’s home and possessions to go to a foreign land. Piper explains,

Surely what Christ means is that he himself makes up for every sacrifice. If you give up a mother’s nearby affection and concern, you get back one hundred times the affection and concern from the ever-present Christ. If you give up the warm comradeship of a brother, you get back one hundred times the warmth and comradeship of Christ. If you give up the sense of at-homeness you had in your house, you get back one hundred times the comfort and security of knowing that your Lord owns every house and land and stream and tree on earth. To prospective missionaries Jesus says, I promise to *work* for and *be* for you so much that you will not be able to speak of having sacrificed anything. . . .

Missionaries are not heroes who can boast in great sacrifice for God. They are the true Christian Hedonists. They know the battle cry of Christian Hedonism is missions. They have discovered a hundred times more joy and satisfaction in a life devoted to Christ and the gospel than in a life devoted to frivolous comforts

¹⁴⁴Piper, *Desiring God*, 198-99.

and pleasures and worldly advancements. And they have taken to heart the rebuke of Jesus: Beware of a self-pitying spirit of sacrifice! Missions is gain! Hundred-fold gain!¹⁴⁵

These two characteristics exemplify true missionary passion, and this passion is the natural character of the church that loves God and His glory. Yet this passion also leads to one more element in the glorifying witness of the church. In a world that is lost and ruled by forces of evil, there is often great suffering among those who are most fervent in their witness. Even suffering, however, exalts the glory of God and bears witness to the infinite value of Christ.

Suffering

As stated previously, suffering has become increasingly important in Piper's theology during the last decade. In his theological perspective, there is a sense in which all suffering that comes to faithful Christians, whether by physical illness, natural disaster, or persecution, is suffering "with Christ and for Christ." He explains,

All experiences of suffering in the path of Christian obedience, whether from persecution or sickness or accident, have this in common: they all threaten our faith in the goodness of God and tempt us to leave the path of obedience. Therefore, every triumph of faith and all perseverance in obedience are testimonies to the goodness of God and the preciousness of Christ – whether the enemy is sickness, Satan, sin, or sabotage.

Therefore all suffering, of every kind, that we endure in the path of our Christian calling is suffering "with Christ" and "for Christ." *With* him in the sense that the suffering comes to us as we are walking with him by faith, and in the sense that it is endured in the strength that he supplies through his sympathizing high-priestly ministry (Hebrews 4:15). *For* him in the sense that the suffering tests and proves our allegiance to his goodness and power, and in the sense that it reveals his worth as an all-sufficient compensation and prize.¹⁴⁶

As stated in the second chapter of this work, suffering rightly borne is the Christian

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 202, 210.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 216.

Hedonist's supreme expression of worship, because by persevering through suffering, he demonstrates the ultimate worth, power, and sufficiency of God.

In his writings on suffering, Piper delineates much more on the nature and purpose of trials and tribulations. He notes that suffering strengthens personal faith, it creates greater anticipation of future glory, it weans Christians from self-reliance, and that some form of persecution is sure to all who are living faithful, active Christian lives. The purpose of this section, however, is to examine suffering particularly in terms of the glorifying witness of the church. Thus, treatment here will be limited to the evangelistic implications of suffering.

In discussing the evangelistic implications of suffering, there are two facets that must be treated: why Christians suffer and what God accomplishes through their suffering. First, it must be understood that suffering persecution is a choice. Illness or accident are most often unavoidable, but suffering persecution is a choice that is embraced. Why do Christians embrace this type of suffering? Piper notes several reasons. One is drawn from texts like 1 Corinthians 15 and Philippians 3 where Paul seems to indicate that he embraces such things for the greater reward of the resurrection and eternal life with Christ. Another reason comes from Philippians 1:29 where it states that suffering for the sake of Christ is literally a "gift" given by God. Yet a third reason goes back to Christ's own words in texts like Luke 9:23-24 where it indicates that taking up the cross and denying self in order to suffer for the faith is a critical aspect of true discipleship.¹⁴⁷ Thus, suffering is a command and embracing it is a matter of obedience. While each of these is certainly true and biblical, the Christian Hedonist sees all of them combined into one primary reason

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 220-22.

to embrace suffering:

We do not choose suffering simply because we are told to, but because the one who tells us to describes it as the path to everlasting joy. He beckons us into the obedience of suffering not to demonstrate the strength of our devotion to duty, nor to reveal the vigor of our moral resolve, nor to prove the heights of our tolerance for pain; but rather to manifest, in childlike faith, the infinite preciousness of his all-satisfying promises. Moses “*chose* to share ill-treatment with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. . . because he looked to the reward” (Hebrews 11:25-26). Therefore his obedience glorified the God of grace, not the resolve to suffer.¹⁴⁸

The second facet to be treated deals with how God uses the Christian’s choice to suffer. When Christians willingly choose to endure persecutions by holding fast to their faith, an incredible witness takes place and incredible advancements are made for the kingdom of God. In *Let the Nations Be Glad*, Piper delineates those evangelistic advancements. The first and most significant witness that takes place is that Christians manifest the sufferings of Christ to a world that otherwise would not be able to behold them. Basing his remarks upon Colossians 1:24, Piper notes, “Christ’s afflictions are not lacking in their atoning sufficiency. They are lacking in that they are not known and felt by people who were not at the cross.”¹⁴⁹ He explains,

The most amazing thing about Colossians 1:24 is *how* Paul completes what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. He says that it is *his own sufferings* that complete Christ’s afflictions. “I rejoice in *my sufferings* for you and I complete in *my flesh* what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” This means, then, that Paul exhibits the sufferings of Christ by suffering *himself* for those he is trying to win. In *his* sufferings they see Christ’s sufferings. Here is the astounding upshot: *God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of his people.* God really means for the body of Christ, the church, to experience some of the suffering he experienced so that when we proclaim the cross as the way to life, people will see the marks of the cross in us and feel the love of the cross from us. Our calling is to make the afflictions of Christ real for people by the afflictions we experience in bringing them the message of salvation.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 237-38.

¹⁴⁹Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 94.

Since Christ is no longer on the earth, he wants his body, the church, to reveal *his* suffering in *its* suffering. Since we are his body, our sufferings are his sufferings.¹⁵⁰

Piper goes on to note that this type of suffering characterized the expansion of Christianity for the first three hundred years of the church. Speaking of the early martyrs, he states, "They triumphed by their suffering. It did not just accompany their witness, it was the capstone of their witness. . . . It is not a fluke of history that the church expands and is strengthened by suffering and martyrdom. This is the way God means it to be."¹⁵¹

The second and most important witness that takes place to the world through suffering is the manner in which the supremacy of God is shown to unbelievers. It is this truth of suffering that flows most directly from Piper's theology of evangelism:

Loss and suffering, joyfully accepted for the kingdom of God, show the supremacy of God's worth more clearly in all the world than all worship and prayer. . . . The supremacy of God is the reason for suffering, running through and above all the other reasons. God ordains suffering because through all the other reasons it displays to the world the supremacy of his worth above all treasures.

Jesus makes crystal clear how we can rejoice in persecution. "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, *for great is your reward in heaven*" (Matthew 5:11-12). The reason we can rejoice in persecution is that the worth of our reward in heaven is so much greater than the worth of all that we lose through suffering on earth. Therefore suffering with joy proves to the world that our treasure is in heaven and not on the earth, and that this treasure is greater than anything the world has to offer. The supremacy of God's worth shines through the pain that his people will gladly bear for his name.¹⁵²

Aside from bearing witness to the ultimate worth of God and embodying the afflictions of Christ, suffering also leads to two important fruits in the life of the church. First, speaking from Philippians 1:14, Piper notes that the suffering of missionaries serves

¹⁵⁰Piper, *Desiring God*, 225.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁵²Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 102-3.

as an example to other believers to bring them out of “their slumbers of indifference and make them bold.”¹⁵³ The example of the faithful thus serves to inspire and embolden the church. Second, God uses suffering and persecution to spread the witness of the church. Speaking from texts like Acts 8:1 and 11:19, Piper notes that because of persecution, Christians fled into the surrounding nations where they boldly proclaimed the gospel. He states, “We must not judge too quickly the apparent setbacks and tactical defeats of the church. If you see things with the eyes of God, the Master Strategist, what you see in every setback is the positioning of troops for a greater advance and a greater display of his wisdom and power and love.”¹⁵⁴

All of the above reason together enforce the idea that Christians should truly rejoice in their sufferings for the sake of Christ. Manifesting the afflictions of Christ among all the peoples of the world is a key way for the church to truly have a glorifying witness. Sadly, many contemporary churches are selfishly focused because so many contemporary Christians are selfishly focused. In such cases, the spirit of joy has been quenched and the expression of true love has been stifled; people have allowed themselves to be far too easily pleased with the comforts of American religion rather than finding ultimate pleasure and satisfaction in Christ. What is needed is repentance of this sin and the return to God-centered, Christ-exalting, evangelistically impassioned hedonism so that churches and Christians shine with the glory and love of God as they were meant to. A church properly focused upon and driven by the glory of God will possess strong resolve to go, to suffer, and, if necessary, even to die to carry Christ’s love and the good news of

¹⁵³Ibid., 91.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 96.

redemption to the nations. The church needs to regain the heart of Paul, who called the people he had won to faith in Christ his “joy” (Phil 4:1). Piper explains,

The church was his joy because in their joy in Christ his joy in Christ was greater. More of Christ’s mercy was magnified in multiplied converts of the cross. So when Paul chose suffering in the cause of world evangelization and said that his aim was to “gain Christ,” he meant that his own personal enjoyment of fellowship with Christ would be eternally greater because of the great assembly of the redeemed enjoying Christ with him.¹⁵⁵

The glorifying witness of the church is thus manifest through love, missionary passion, and suffering. The church is God’s ordained instrument for reaching the nations and manifesting His supremacy to all the peoples of the earth. Now that this final theological tenet of Piper’s evangelistic ministry has been delineated, the focus of this dissertation must turn to proving the thesis set forth in the first chapter. It will be proved by demonstrating that the four tenets treated above define and drive Piper’s evangelistic ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church.

¹⁵⁵Piper, *Desiring God*, 233.

CHAPTER 4

PIPER'S EVANGELISTIC MINISTRY

The objective of this fourth chapter is to examine five facets of John Piper's ministry of evangelism in an effort to prove that the four theological tenets given in the previous chapter (the sovereignty and supremacy of God, the depraved affections of man, conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist, and the glorifying witness of the church) are indeed the truths that define and drive his evangelistic ministry. Prior to addressing those facets, however, it is important for the reader to have a proper understanding of the ministry context of Bethlehem Baptist Church.

Bethlehem's Ministry Context

In October of 1867, the Plymouth Congregational Church organized its first mission in southeast Minneapolis. The name of the mission was Vine Street Church. By the early 1870s, the congregation had outgrown its chapel and purchased property in a residential neighborhood a mile east of what was downtown Minneapolis. They changed their name to the Second Congregational Church and held their first service in the basement of their new church building in July of 1874. Over the next decade, the Elliot Park neighborhood in which the church was located became prominently Scandinavian in population, so in May of 1885, Second Congregational relocated and their church was purchased by the First Swedish Baptist Church of Minneapolis. First Swedish Baptist had

also been founded in 1871, and they had become locally known as the “Scandinavian Baptist Church.” The church was mainly composed of immigrants from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark whose shared theology overshadowed their ethnic differences.¹

During the early 1900s, a language problem arose as the children of the immigrants became more fluent in English. First Swedish Baptist began the incremental change to the English language in 1919 that became official in 1936. One of the results of this shift to the English language was the changing of the church name. On September 6, 1945, the church renamed itself Bethlehem Baptist Church. By this time, the church began to struggle with the issue of relocation as a number of members had moved out to affluent suburbs and as new waves of immigrants came to Elliot Park that spoke neither English nor Swedish. But by 1954, the church had decided to remain at its current location and to build additional facilities to house its burgeoning ministries. In 1956, an 18,000 square foot education building was built adjacent to the sanctuary as the church conducted a tremendous ministry to its families and to neighborhood children that were bused in for Sunday School.²

By the mid 1960s, Bethlehem faced challenges again as downtown Minneapolis expanded and more members moved to the suburbs. The church historian stated in 1971, “Today the area is made up of a mixed, transient, and declining population. There are few children. Whole blocks of houses have been torn down to make room for freeways.”³ Even as the congregation shrank, however, God was at work to protect and prepare them

¹Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Old Sanctuary Building History,” Church Photo Directory, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, 1999, 4-6.

²Ibid., 10-12.

³Ibid., 13.

for what He was about to do. Bethlehem remained untouched by the construction and even gained greater visibility and accessibility as a result of the interchanges.⁴

Furthermore, a large number of government housing units and large, low-income apartment complexes were built in close proximity to the church. Though ministering in such an urban context undoubtedly challenged BBC, God had a reason for keeping them where they were. By 1980, when John Piper was called as the fourteenth pastor of Bethlehem,⁵ the church was set to recover its strong community presence and to begin an unprecedented time of growth.

Today, Bethlehem remains in what is largely a low-income area of homes and apartments, existing quite literally in the shadow of the office buildings and sports arenas of downtown Minneapolis. Bethlehem is one of about 800 churches in the Baptist General Convention, an evangelical denomination headquartered just outside Chicago that includes churches in the United States and Canada. The denomination also operates Bethel College and Seminary in St. Paul and Bethel Seminary West in San Diego.⁶ In terms of state affiliations, Bethlehem is part of the Minnesota Baptist Conference which is headquartered in St. Paul.⁷

Under Piper's leadership, the church has come to epitomize his theological perspectives. Bethlehem's constitution and bylaws reflect their doctrinal identity as a

⁴Ibid.

⁵"Annual Report: 1980" (Minneapolis: Bethlehem Baptist Church, January 1981), 7.

⁶"Affiliations (of BBC)," [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/aboutus/affiliations.htm>; Internet.

⁷Ibid.

theologically reformed church as well as their commitment to a congregational form of government. There are two bodies of church officers: elders and deacons. The elders are responsible to govern, teach the Word, and tend the flock, while the deacons assist the elders by performing “services of advice, administration and implementation.”⁸ Thus, the elders are the key spiritual leaders and are “equal in authority but may be specialized in function.”⁹ It is important to note at this point that Piper does not set himself above these officers; he considers himself to be one of the teaching/preaching elders of BBC.

In terms of cultural composition, Bethlehem is seeking to reflect the community of Minneapolis. They identify themselves as “old and young, married and single, urban and suburban, growing in ethnic and economic diversity,” and fervently dedicated to spreading “a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.”¹⁰ Thus, Bethlehem embodies the Christian Hedonism taught to them by their pastor. Their identity statement continues,

One of the Biblical truths that drives us is great news that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. This means that worship is a feast for the souls of God’s hungry people. Hearts that are hungry for God show the goodness of heaven’s delights. “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desire of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). So we go hard together after God.

And this vision of reality radically frees us from passing and dying trinkets of the world and compels us (as joy always does) to spread what we love the most through radical acts of love. We long to see those who do not treasure God now, whether in the American urban centers or suburban sprawls or among the un-

⁸“Constitution and Bylaws: Bethlehem Baptist Church” [on-line]; accessed 30 October 2002; available from http://www.bbcmpls.org/aboutus/constitution_and_bylaws.htm; Internet.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰“Who We Are” [on-line]; accessed 2 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/aboutus/index.htm>; Internet.

reached peoples of the world, to come to know true and forever joy – which is only found in God.¹¹

In recent years, God has honored their passion and quite literally brought the mission field to Bethlehem. True to their history, large numbers of immigrants continue to be housed in the apartments surrounding the church. Within the last decade, over 50,000 Somalian refugees have been relocated to Minneapolis. It is the largest concentration of Somalis outside their native country. How has BBC responded? Piper and his congregation have an incredible heart to overcome the cultural obstacles and reach them with the gospel. This cross-cultural, evangelistic opportunity is viewed as God's latest blessing upon a congregation that has already seen incredible growth.¹²

When Piper began his ministry at Bethlehem in 1980, the membership numbered about 750. Sunday morning worship attendance was around four hundred, and there were a total of thirty-three baptisms for the year. The ministry staff numbered only a handful in 1980, and the church budget was less than two hundred thousand.¹³ Today Bethlehem has a dozen full-time ministry staff members and an annual budget of over three million dollars.¹⁴ By the end of 2000, average Sunday morning worship attendance was 2035, almost double what it had been in 1997,¹⁵ and half of that attendance was age eighteen and

¹¹Ibid.

¹²John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 2 October 2000, Minneapolis, notes.

¹³"Annual Report: 1980," 8.

¹⁴"2001 Annual Report" (Minneapolis: Bethlehem Baptist Church, January 2002), ii, 45.

¹⁵"2000 Annual Report" (Minneapolis: Bethlehem Baptist Church, January 2001), 3. The 2035 figure includes only those present in the service and the service overflow areas, not preschool children who are present during worship times. If they were

under.¹⁶ According to the results of Bethlehem's "2000 by 2000" ministry project, from 1990 to 2000, 722 people came to saving faith in Jesus Christ through the various ministries of the church body, 89 career missionaries were sent out, 823 participated in short-term mission projects (less than two years), 49 were commissioned to the pastoral ministry, and 214 members were sent out and successfully planted five churches.¹⁷

Even sending members out for church plants, however, has not curbed the growth that Bethlehem is currently experiencing. In 1991, Bethlehem began worshiping in a new, 1400 seat sanctuary built at the north end of their property.¹⁸ In less than a decade, that space proved far too small. By the start of 2000, Bethlehem was holding three Sunday morning services to accommodate growth. They have even cancelled much of their morning Sunday School in 2002 as the old sanctuary and some of its adjoining spaces are replaced with a larger education facility.¹⁹ Yet even greater steps need to be taken to make room for what God is doing in and through the church.

Thus, on October 13, 2002, Bethlehem became a multi-site church. Citing an

included in the manner that most other churches report, worship attendance would be about 2400.

¹⁶David Michael, Pastor for Parenting and Children's Discipleship, interview by author, 14 May 2001, Minneapolis, tape recording, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis. Of the approximately 2400 people attending on Sunday morning, David stated that approximately 300 were youth and approximately 900 were children.

¹⁷ "2000 Annual Report," 29. Career and Short-term missionaries were sent to 68 different countries. David Livingston, Associate for Cell Life and Adult Ministries, indicates in his portion of the report that of the 722 professions of faith from 1990 to 2000, 231 came during the year 2000 alone (17).

¹⁸Church Photo Directory, 13.

¹⁹"Going without Going" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/goingwogoing.htm>; Internet. The need for a newer, larger education facility is another factor emphasizing their growth.

estimated Sunday morning attendance of over 2800 (with a bulging second service), pastoral fatigue from preaching three morning services, and the commitment to continue spreading “a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples,” Bethlehem launched a North extension eight miles from the main campus in Maranatha Hall of Northwestern College. Worship is live at both sites, and Piper alternates preaching locations with the sermon being simulcast to the other site. Bethlehem has called this venture “Going without Going,”²⁰ and their intent is eventually to purchase and develop property for the second site. Though this contemporary strategy can be employed as a more gradual method of church planting, the leadership of Bethlehem is not yet sure if the second location will one day become its own entity or continue indefinitely as Bethlehem’s second location.²¹

Bethlehem Baptist Church has indeed come to exemplify a strong love for God’s glory and the corresponding passion to reach people in their city and around the globe with the life-changing message of the gospel. They embody and are driven by the Christian Hedonism first introduced to them in 1980 by Pastor Piper. This chapter will now continue by proving that truth through the examination of five key aspects of Bethlehem’s ministry of evangelism: the pulpit ministry, the prayer ministry, the biblical training ministry (TBI), the local and global outreach ministries, and Piper’s writing ministry. The goal of this work is to demonstrate that the four theological tenets delineated in the previous chapter do in fact define and drive each of these ministries.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

Preaching Ministry

In examining Piper's pulpit ministry, it is beneficial to first understand the manner in which he preaches. It must be noted at the beginning that Piper's sermons are heavily laden with doctrine and primarily expository in style. Through the Desiring God Ministries website, one can access all of the Sunday morning messages Piper has brought at Bethlehem since his installation as pastor. While there are some topical messages, the majority of his sermons have been expository in nature – based upon and defined primarily by a single passage of Scripture. He has also preached through entire books of the Bible. During his tenure at BBC, Piper has preached through the books of 2 Peter, Galatians, Ruth, 1 John, Malachi, Acts (chaps. 1-13), 1 Peter, and Hebrews, as well as multi-chapter segments from many other books of the Bible. He recently concluded chapters one through eight in the book of Romans, an expository series he began in April of 1998.²² Piper likewise encourages all pastors to bring expository messages:

All Christian preaching should be the exposition and application of biblical texts. Our authority as preachers sent by God rises and falls with our manifest allegiance to the text of Scripture. I say "manifest" because there are so many preachers who say they are doing exposition when they do not ground their assertions explicitly – "manifestly" – in the text. They don't show their people clearly that the assertions of their preaching are coming from specific, reliable words of Scripture that the people can see for themselves.²³

In addition to his style of preaching, it is also important to note at the outset how Piper closes his sermons at Bethlehem. The specific question regards how Piper conducts an invitation. His answer is simple – he does not have one. He does issue a call

²²"Sermon Manuscripts" [on-line]; accessed 2 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/80-02/index.html>; Internet.

²³John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 41.

to respond to the gospel with repentance and faith, but he does not close his services with a hymn or with a challenge to come forward. At the end of the sermon, he simply lets people know that he and the other elders/staff members will be present at the front of the sanctuary if anyone has questions about spiritual matters or needs prayer. The service is closed with prayer and then people line up as others are exiting the service. The only time he does challenge people to come forward at the end of a message is at special emphasis services, like missions week at Bethlehem. At these times he invites people forward if they are committing themselves to missions or ministry service.²⁴

Given the treatment of those two preliminary matters, this work can now turn to analyzing the content of Piper's sermons. The reason this particular ministry is the first to be examined is because preaching is Piper's primary way of sharing the gospel. For him personally, pulpit work is the main method of evangelism, as it is the main method in the New Testament. Yet he is quick to note that not everyone is called or gifted to be a preacher of the gospel. So for those members who are not preachers, he seeks to equip them with his preaching to do marketplace evangelism.²⁵

In a sense, it has already been shown that Piper's ministry of evangelism through preaching is defined and driven by the four theological tenets. Almost all of Piper's written material existed as messages or lectures before being compiled and expanded into book form. Thus, virtually all of the content of the previous chapter came from sermons. Additionally, it is virtually inconceivable that a pastor's sermons on

²⁴John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 16 April 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

²⁵John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 22 October 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

definitive topics and texts would differ from his writings on the same topics and texts authored during the same immediate time period. Throughout his twenty-two years as pastor of Bethlehem, Piper has displayed a steadfast theological consistency in every aspect of his ministry of the Word. Therefore, this section will prove the thesis with samplings from a number of Piper's sermons without unduly lengthening this work and without overburdening the reader with the breadth of material that could be presented.

While material will be taken from messages primarily addressing evangelism, Piper's sermons cannot be neatly separated into the two distinct categories of "for the lost" and "for the saved." Piper has openly stated that he really does not distinguish between preaching for evangelistic purposes and preaching for the edification of the saints. According to him, every Sunday the saints need what will help them trust God more. The lost likewise need what will help them trust God. Thus, regardless of the type of service, he preaches to build faith. For example, in one interview Piper stated that he was going for a speaking engagement at a church where he was to bring an evangelistic message at a Saturday evening outreach service as well as preaching to the normal church membership the following Sunday morning. He noted that illustrations would be about the only major difference between the two messages. When he preaches evangelistically, he simply addresses coming to faith as an additional facet of building faith in God.²⁶

As noted previously, the sovereignty and supremacy of God is the pinnacle of Piper's theology and particularly of his theology of evangelism. One would be hard-pressed to locate a sermon by Piper that does not mention or is not shaped by this doctrine; it is a theme that has been present since the very beginning of his ministry. As

²⁶John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 8 October 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

the newly called pastor of Bethlehem in 1980, he preached a sermon that stressed the supremacy and fame of God entitled, "God Created Us for His Glory." Therein he stated,

Man was created from the beginning *in God's image* that he might image forth *God's* glory. He was to multiply and fill the earth so that the knowledge of the glory of God would cover the sea. And ever since the fall of man into sin, people have refused to align themselves with this divine goal. But all *God's* acts have been aimed at seeing it through. . . . Two things cry out to be stressed in our day. First, our salvation is for *God's* sake. "For *My* name's sake I will withhold my anger. For the sake of *My* praise I restrain it for you." To be sure, God *will* save His people, He will bless us infinitely! But it is for *His* name's sake, for *His* praise, for *His* glory that He does it. . . . Where this perspective is lost, and the magnifying of *God's* glory is no longer seen as the great aim of redemption, pitiful substitutes arise – man centered philosophies that exalt human value in a way that distorts the work of redemption and belittles the primacy of God.²⁷

In 1984, Piper preached a sermon entitled "The Pastor's Role in World Missions" that linked the supremacy of God and worship. He stated,

Unless we take our starting point from the sovereign majesty of God and His ultimate allegiance to his own glory above all else, our missionary theology and strategy and motivation will become man-centered and will in the end degenerate into a powerless sentimentality. God does everything he does in creation and redemption for his own glory. Therefore, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, that is, to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever. We cannot add to God's glory. We can only reflect its value by enjoying it, adoring it, praising it, worshiping it, and being so satisfied by it that our hearts are guarded from other attractions. The reason man was created in the beginning and the reason the church is being recreated in the end is for the worship of God. Missions therefore is neither *God's* primary end nor the primary end of the *church*. It is a means to the primary end of worship. Missions exists because worship doesn't. There will be no missions in the age to come. Worship will be our life. Missions is not our ultimate goal. It is a means to our goal.²⁸

In a 1989 sermon entitled "From Wonder to Witness," Piper demonstrates how

²⁷John Piper, "God Created Us for His Glory," a sermon delivered 27 July 1980 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 5 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/80/072780.html>; Internet.

²⁸John Piper, "A Pastor's Role in World Missions," a sermon delivered 31 October 1984 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 31 January 2001; available from <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper84/103184.htm>; Internet.

the motivation to witness should flow from a proper grasp of God's deity and sovereignty:

God is at pains to declare that He is God and He alone. And to drive that home He speaks of His sovereignty. He is willing to go so far as to claim final responsibility for all the calamities of the world. "I am the One who forms light and creates darkness, and causes prosperity and creates calamity; I am the Lord who does ALL these things." Why does God take final responsibility for all the disasters of the world? Because He wants to fill us with trembling awe that He is God. And that means He is sovereign. He acts and none can reverse it! . . . [cites Isa 46:9-10]. . .

And so here they come together again. "I am God!" And: "I will accomplish all my purpose!" Deity. And: Sovereignty. I act and none can hinder! God nurtures our wonder at His deity by directing our attention to His sovereignty. Why? Because without sovereignty there is no true God. The God of Isaiah is passionate to define Himself in terms of sovereignty: "I act and none can reverse it." "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose." "I make well and create woe, I am the Lord who does all these things."

So the first point of our text is that God is God, which means that God is sovereign – He works and none can hinder. He is thrilled with His own deity and sovereignty and so should we be.

But now we must ask, does God nurture this wonder in us as a merely private experience? Have we reached the apex of our joy and the climax of our divine call when we have an overwhelming, private experience of God's glory and power? NO! It is neither the apex of our joy nor the climax of our call because God ignites the fire of our worship to make us shine in the world. This is the second point of our text, God means to make a witness out of our wonder. He nurtures our wonder by showing us that He is a sovereign God; and He makes our wonder into a witness for all the world [cites Isa 46:10].²⁹

Piper has also preached on how God specifically leads His witnesses to act according to His elective purposes. In 1991, he preached a message entitled, "The Leading of the Lord in Personal Evangelism." Here he used the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch to say,

What stands out in this story is that a very unlikely candidate for conversion to Christ is found and converted through the supernatural leading of the Lord himself, and not through human planning. The person was from Ethiopia in Africa and had come all the way up to Jerusalem (at least 500 miles) to worship God. So out of all the tens of thousands of Jews and Gentiles and Samaritans that need Christ, the Lord sovereignly sets his favor on this man and sends an angel to

²⁹John Piper, "From Wonder to Witness," a sermon delivered 28 June 1989 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 4 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/89/062889.html>; Internet.

Philip, the deacon-evangelist, and says in verse 26, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." Philip goes, like Abraham probably, not knowing all that God has in mind. But when he gets to the road the Spirit tells him the next step to take. This supernatural guidance comes one step at a time. In verse 29 the Spirit says, "Go up and join this chariot." That's all he says. Not what for. Nor who is in the chariot. Just go to the chariot. . . [and] the timing of the Spirit proves perfect.³⁰

Later in the sermon, Piper makes it clear that he is not completely discounting human planning in evangelism. In fact, he encourages "wise and prayerful planning on the basis of circumstances we can see" while also calling the church to listen "responsively to the Spirit when he may want to tell us to do something that we might never think of doing through our own planning."³¹

In 1995, Piper was leading his church back through the fundamental tenets of their mission and ministry in preparation for some new undertakings. During this time, he preached a series of messages on Bethlehem's mission statement whereby he reiterated the role of the supremacy of God in determining and driving their outreach. He stated,

God is absolutely supreme. He is the greatest of all Beings. He is the first and the last. There is none like him. He is infinite, eternal, and unchanging in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

And yet how important is he on television or at your work or in advertising or movies or sports or shopping malls. Those who grasp the Mission Statement are stunned by the incredible neglect of God in our world. If he is supreme – if he is the most important reality in the universe, creating all, upholding all, governing all, calling all to account – then his virtual insignificance in our culture is the most appalling, terrifying, heart-breaking thing in the world. . . .

Our mission is to soak life with the supremacy of God. Our mission is to bring all of life into connection with God. Our mission is to exult in the fact that there is not a square inch of this planet, or a single moment in time over which God does not say, "Mine!" Our mission is to live in the presence of God every

³⁰John Piper, "The Leading of the Lord in Personal Evangelism," a sermon delivered 26 May 1991 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 4 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/91/052691.html>; Internet.

³¹Ibid.

moment of every day, everywhere we are and savor his supremacy there. . . . If all these things are so – if God is the supreme reality in the universe; if he is related to all things; if he stirs a passion for his supremacy in all who know him; if this is the source of deep and everlasting joy; if God means to include all the peoples – then we cannot sit on these things. We cannot hoard them. We cannot hide them. We must spread them. We exist *to spread* a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.³²

A year later, when Bethlehem was holding their annual Missions Fest, Piper preached a sermon entitled “Driving Convictions behind World Missions at Bethlehem.” In this sermon, he delineated seven tenets that drive their ministry of missions. The first three related directly to the sovereignty and supremacy of God in evangelism:

Conviction #1: God is passionately committed to his fame. God’s ultimate goal is that his name be known and praised by all the peoples of the earth.

Conviction #2: God’s passion to be known and praised by all the peoples of the earth is not selfish, but loving.

Conviction #3: God’s purpose to be praised among all the nations cannot fail. It is an absolutely certain promise. It is going to happen.³³

Piper explains,

So to sum up convictions #1 and #2: there are two basic problems with the universe: God is profaned and people are perishing. Conviction #1 says that God will not suffer his name to be dishonored indefinitely, but will act mightily to vindicate his name and glorify himself among the nations. Conviction #2 says that God has planned a way to do this by saving the perishing through the death of his Son, Jesus, and making them a worshiping people who enjoy his glory. In the sacrifice of his own Son for the sake of the nations, God reveals the pinnacle of his glory – his mercy. So the salvation of the nations and the glorification of God happen together in missions. They are not at odds. It is a loving thing for God to pursue his glory like this. . . [and in regard to conviction #3] no one, absolutely no one,

³²John Piper, “The Mission and Vision of Bethlehem Baptist Church: Volume Two,” a sermon delivered 1 October 1995 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 26 September 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/95/100195.html>; Internet.

³³John Piper and Tom Steller, “Driving Convictions Behind World Missions at Bethlehem (1996)” [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/drivingconvictions.htm>; Internet.

can frustrate the designs of God to fulfill his missionary plans for the nations. In the darkest moments of our pain, God is hiding his explosives behind enemy lines.³⁴

The doctrine of the sovereignty and supremacy of God has continued to drive Piper and Bethlehem Baptist Church in recent years. In 2000, Piper again preached a series of sermons to prepare BBC to undertake a major building project for desperately needed education space. He preached, "The most fundamental thing we can say about EDUCATION FOR EXULTATION is that it is about God. This vision and this building are about educating children, youth, and adults to exult in God. And the most fundamental thing we can say about God is that he is sovereign."³⁵ He continues,

As I prepared for this series, I asked again what the deep, central values of my life are. Why, I ask, do I cherish God's sovereignty so deeply? Why is it the cornerstone of my thought and my preaching and my life? Why do I love to talk about it and meditate on it in the morning and in the evening? The answer that I came to again is that without sovereignty there is no true God. Without a sovereign God, there is no God Do you see what is at stake here? If we lose the sovereignty of God, we eventually lose God. If the flavor of God's sovereignty goes out of our conversation – and our education! – deity goes out of our conversation and our education. The sovereignty of God is the cornerstone of life and preaching and education at Bethlehem, because God is the cornerstone of life and preaching and education at Bethlehem. We want to be God-besotted people. We want our youth to be more entranced by God than by any music group or any sporting event or any TV or movie hit. We want to be a church where children and youth and adults – single, married, male, female, rich, poor, thinkers, feelers, doers – know God and love God and are filled with all the fulness of God – for who he really is.

How does this happen? How do children and youth and adults inside and outside the church find out about the sovereignty of God and come to cherish it as the foundation of all their hope in God's grace in Christ Jesus? Does it happen with dreams? Does it happen with mere reasonings about the world? No, it happens another way. And this bears directly on our vision of EDUCATION FOR EXULTATION. It happens because God chooses people to know him and trust

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵John Piper, "I Am the Lord, and Besides Me There Is No Savior. Education for Exultation: In God," a sermon delivered 30 January 2000 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/drivingconvictions.htm>; Internet.

him and understand him and then to be his witnesses in a God-denying culture.³⁶

One final example comes from a sermon on missions entitled “I Will Build My Church – From All Peoples” that Piper preached during BBC’s annual missions focus in October of 2001. It is a sermon based on Matthew 16:13-26 that focuses upon the supremacy of Christ in building the church:

World missions is not ultimately dependent on human initiative or human wisdom or human perseverance. It is ultimately dependent on the power and wisdom and faithfulness of the risen and living Christ to keep this promise: “I will build my church.” Not, “You will build my church.” Or, “Missionaries will build my church.” Or, “Pastors will build my church.” But, “*I* will build my church.” So Paul was jealous to give this glory to Jesus. In Romans 15:18 he says, “I will not presume to speak of anything except what *Christ has accomplished* through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed.” Christ accomplished it. Christ brought about the obedience of the peoples. Yes, missionaries are crucial. Pastors and elders are crucial. But we are not ultimate. Christ is ultimate. “*I* will build my church.” One missionary plants. Another missionary or pastor waters. Yes. But Christ gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). Christ builds the church. Church planting and church establishing is supernatural work, or it is not the church that gets built, but only a human organization.³⁷

The above quotes are taken from a 21 year span in Piper’s preaching ministry, and each one points to the fact that the central driving theological tenet for Piper’s ministry as a whole, and specifically for his evangelistic ministry, is the sovereignty and supremacy of God. The fame of God, the glory of Christ, election, and worship were all mentioned in the excerpts above, as they are throughout most of his sermons. God is primary, everything else is secondary; and everything that is secondary exists to reflect the ultimacy, sufficiency, and glory of the primary.

The second tenet of Piper’s theology of evangelism is the depraved affections of

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷John Piper, “I Will Build My Church – From All Peoples” a sermon delivered 28 October 2001 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/02/102801.html>; Internet.

man. In proving that this tenet is present in his preaching, excerpts will once again be set forth from his sermons to demonstrate man's total depravity and thus his "affection" for the things of this world. In one early sermon, Piper addresses depravity in terms of gratitude:

A creature owes his Creator the affection of gratitude in proportion to his dependence on God's goodness. . . . We have not felt, nor do we now, nor will we feel tomorrow the depth and intensity and consistency of gratitude to God which we owe him as our Creator. And we do not even need the Bible to tell us that we are guilty. We know that we have not rendered to God what we demand for ourselves from our neighbor. We know that the judicial sentiment in our hearts which holds other people guilty for ingratitude also bears vivid witness that God holds us guilty for our astonishing ingratitude to him. . . [cites Rom 1:18-21].

When every human being stands before God to give an account of his life, God will not have to use one sentence of Scripture to show people their guilt and fitness for condemnation. He will simply ask them three questions: 1) Was it not clear enough in nature that everything you had was a gift, that as my creature you were dependent on me for life and breath and everything? 2) Did not the judicial sentiment in your own heart always hold other people guilty when they lacked the gratitude they should have had in response to a great kindness? 3) Has your life been filled with the joy of gratitude toward me in proportion to my kindness to you? The case is closed. . . . God is worth more than a man – infinitely more – and therefore the defamation of his character through manifold marks of our ingratitude bring down a sentence of eternal destruction.³⁸

In another sermon on missions, he speaks very plainly of man's sinful nature:

Man by nature does not have a heart to glorify God. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23). In our wickedness we suppress the truth that God is our Sovereign and is worthy of all our allegiance and affection. By nature we exchange the glory of the immortal God for dim images of it in creation (Rom. 1:18, 23). . . . [Therefore] the infinite horrors of hell are intended by God to be a vivid demonstration of the infinite value of the glory of God. The Biblical assumption of the justice of Hell is the clearest testimony to the infiniteness of the sin of failing to glorify God. All of us have failed. All the nations have failed. Therefore the weight of infinite guilt rests on every human head because of our failure to

³⁸John Piper, "Conversion to Christ: The Making of a Christian Hedonist," a sermon delivered 18 September 1983 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 30 January 2001; available from <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper83/091883m.htm>; Internet.

delight in God more than we delight in our own self-sufficiency.³⁹

In an excellent sermon entitled “Why We Need a Savior,” Piper addresses again the issue of man’s spiritual deadness before Christ and the fact that even the good that is done without the motive of God’s glory is sin:

The reason we need a Savior is not just that we are in the doghouse with God and need to be forgiven for offending his glory. We need a Savior because we are in the morgue. In the doghouse you might whimper. You might say you are sorry. You might make some good resolutions. You might decide to cast yourself on the mercy of God. But what can you do if you are in the morgue? If this means what it looks like it means, we didn’t need just any ordinary Savior, we needed a great Savior. What does Paul mean when he says that we were dead in our trespasses and sins? . . . At the end it says, “We were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” In other words the things we have done to bring the wrath of God upon us we have done by nature. We need a Savior not just because we have sinned, but because we have sinned by nature. We are by nature sinners.

But someone will say, “This can’t be, because I know many unbelievers who do good deeds.” Ah, but when you say that you do not have a view to God. When you judge what is sin and what is righteousness, don’t just think of man! Think of God. We were made for God! He is worthy of all of our love and trust and honor and thanks and obedience and worship. We may well build our hospitals and feed the hungry and educate the ignorant, but if it doesn’t spring from trust in God, and if we don’t do it to give him glory, and if we don’t have a view to the salvation of others, all we do is sin with respect to God.⁴⁰

The reality of man’s sinful nature, and the resulting fact that unrepentant sinners face an eternity in the torment of hell, provides a strong imperative for evangelism. Piper elaborates,

Perishing is the eternal punishment that people fall into when they die if they have not repented. That’s how serious sin is. And we have all sinned, and sin every day. Now don’t treat this as mere church talk. Write it on a card and use a rubber band to bind it on the visor of your car. All those people out there will perish if they do not repent. Tape it in your wallet to see it every time you buy something – that clerk will perish if she does not repent. Your children will perish, your par-

³⁹Piper, “A Pastor’s Role in World Missions.”

⁴⁰John Piper, “Why We Need a Savior,” a sermon delivered 8 December 1985 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 4 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/85/120885.html>; Internet.

ents will perish, your neighbors will perish, your colleagues will perish if they do not repent. This is not irrelevant church talk. This is just as practical as the AIDS brochure we all got in the mail from Dr. Koop. And it is a thousand times more urgent and more important. . . . Sin is an infinitely more dangerous disease than AIDS. And if the world is willing to spend millions and millions of dollars to wake this country up to the dangers of AIDS, how much more should we, who know the cure spend whatever it costs to wake this city up to the danger of sin!⁴¹

The above quotes demonstrate Piper's belief that man is indeed totally depraved. The affections of the heart are set upon sin and the things of the world rather than upon God. Piper notes that because of pride, man becomes so full of his own self-significance that he cannot even imagine what it is to tremble before the Maker and Judge. He notes that pride is the "moral corruption [that] lies behind all the evils and miseries of the world. And, worst of all, this pride has put us at odds with God, so that, as Romans 3:19b says, 'Every mouth is stopped and all the world has become accountable to God.' We are under his judgement because of our pride and all the sin that flows from it."⁴² The solution for these depraved affections of man lies in Christ and the gift of salvation wrought in the heart by God.

The third tenet, conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist, flows then from the second tenet discussed above. Man is spiritually dead and headed for eternal torment because of his sinful nature; he has neither the ability nor inclination to save himself. Only God can make him alive. Conversion, therefore, is the solution to sin, but for Piper, conversion means coming to treasure God above all else. The definitive message

⁴¹ John Piper, "Unless You Repent You Will All Likewise Perish," a sermon delivered 5 June 1988 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 4 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/88/060588.html>; Internet.

⁴² John Piper, "Justification By Faith Is the End of Boasting," a sermon delivered 30 May 1999 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 4 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/99/053099.html>; Internet.

on this subject was preached at Bethlehem in 1983. It is entitled “Conversion to Christ: the Making of a Christian Hedonist.” At the beginning of this message, Piper explains why true conversion means becoming a Christian Hedonist:

Someone may ask, “If our aim is conversion, why can’t we just say, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved?’ Why bring in this new terminology of Christian Hedonism?” It’s a good question. Here’s my answer. We live in a superficially Christianized society where thousands of lost people think they do believe in Jesus. In most of my witnessing to unbelievers and nominal Christians, the command “Believe in Jesus and you shall be saved,” is virtually meaningless. Drunks on the street say they do. Unmarried couples sleeping together say they do. Elderly people who haven’t sought worship or fellowship for forty years say they do. Every stripe of world-loving church attendees say they do. My responsibility as a preacher of the gospel and a teacher of the church is not just to repeat precious biblical sentences, but to speak the truth of those sentences in a way that will prick the conscience of the hearer and help you feel your need for Christ. What I am trying to do is take a neglected and essential teaching of Scripture and make it as pointed as I can in the hope that some hearts will be stabbed broad awake. And therefore I say, when a person is converted to Jesus Christ that person is made into a Christian Hedonist. Unless a man be born again into a Christian Hedonist he cannot see the Kingdom of God. That’s what I want to try to show from Scripture.⁴³

As the sermon continues, he outlines God’s supremacy and man’s depravity, and then he addresses what man must do to be saved. He cites Acts 16:31, John 1:12, Acts 3:19, Hebrews 5:9, Matthew 18:3, Mark 8:34-35, Matthew 10:37, 1 Corinthians 16:22, 2 Timothy 4:8, and Luke 14:33, and then he states the following:

These are some of the conditions that the New Testament says we must meet in order to benefit from the death of Christ and be saved. We must believe on him, receive him, turn from our sin, obey him, humble ourselves like little children, and love him more than we love our family, our possessions or our own life. This is what it means to be converted to Christ. And this alone is the way of life everlasting.

But what holds all these conditions together? What unites them? What one thing impels a person to do them? I think the answer is given in the little parable of Matthew 13:44: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then *from his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

⁴³Piper, “Conversion to Christ.”

This parable describes how a person is converted and brought into the kingdom of heaven. He discovers a treasure and is impelled by joy to sell all he has in order to have this treasure. *You are converted to Christ when Christ becomes for you a treasure chest of holy joy.* The new birth of this holy affection is the common root of all the conditions of salvation. We are born again – converted – when Christ becomes a treasure in whom we find so much delight that trusting him, obeying him and turning from all that belittles him becomes our normal habit.⁴⁴

It is this joy that leads to repentant faith. Speaking specifically of the relationship between repentance and faith, Piper notes,

Repentance involves believing God (Jonah 3:5) rather than the Satan's claim that more joy can be found in sin than in obedience. It is a "being persuaded" about the danger of impenitence (Luke 16:31) and the way of escape through repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). It involves grief over past sins and present sinful tendencies. . . . And it involves turning from evil ways (Jonah 3:8).

So faith and repentance are not properly two separate things. The turning of repentance is a turning from trusting in other things to a trusting in God. And with a new trust in God as counselor and protector and provider there is also a turning to a new life of joyful obedience.⁴⁵

This aspect of faith is explained further with a quote from a 1994 sermon entitled "The Duty: Faith." It reads,

Believing includes a satisfaction in your heart with all that God is for you in Christ. In other words, if your believing is only an agreement in the head with facts about Jesus, your faith is no different than the faith of the devils – who believe and tremble (James 2:19). Knowing and agreeing with truths is necessary, but it is not enough. It doesn't make you a Christian. Believing means being satisfied with what God is for you in Jesus.

Consider John 6:35. . . Believing in Jesus is a coming to him in a way that satisfies your soul-hunger and your soul-thirst. Believing is a very powerful thing. It renovates the heart with new affections. What once satisfied, is now distasteful. Believing is based on new taste buds in the soul. Once the soul was satisfied – or so it thought – with what the world could offer. Now Christ is so satisfying to the soul that the world is losing its power.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Piper, "Unless You Repent You Will All Likewise Perish."

⁴⁶John Piper, "The Duty: Faith," a sermon delivered 18 December 1994 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 4 November 2002; available from

He further states that believing is wrought by God. Repenting and believing are human acts, but they are preceded by God's act of regeneration. Citing John 6:37, 44, and 65, Piper states, "Jesus' answer to the spiritual blindness of the human mind and the spiritual hardness of the human heart is that the Father draws them. He takes away the blindness of the mind and replaces the heart of stone. He grants us to see the truth of Christ's self-evidencing glory and he gives us a taste for the all-satisfying beauty of the Lord."⁴⁷ Thus, men respond because of God's regenerative work, but respond they must. That is why Piper issues the invitation to believe. The previous quote continues,

And he [God] does this very simply through the words of truth – like John 3:16 and like this sermon (John 17:20). God is at work right now lifting the veil of the mind and softening hearts. My plea to you is: don't harden your heart. Don't stiffen your neck. Yield to the word of the Lord this morning. Believe on Jesus and you shall not perish but have eternal life.⁴⁸

Though repentance and belief are human responsibilities, conversion ultimately exalts God and not man. Piper explains,

When God decides, sovereignly and graciously, to overcome that suicidal slavery to sin in our hearts, the way he does it is intentionally designed to preserve and exalt his own supremacy and centrality in the process of salvation. The Biblical pictures of our rescue put God unmistakably at the center and give him all the glory. . . . If you have one whisper of genuine desire for God in your heart, it is the work of God and the triumph of grace. We did not barter or deal or work or hope or believe. Nothing in us merited or constrained the life-giving work of God. It was entirely grace – absolutely free and unconditional. It was not based on our prior choice. It created our choice.⁴⁹

<http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/94/121894.html>; Internet.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹John Piper, "The God-centered Ground of Saving Grace," a sermon delivered 25 March 1994 at the Ligonier Conference, Dallas, Texas [on-line]; accessed 26 September 2002; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/library/topics/gods_passion/god_centered_ground.html; Internet.

Thus, Piper preaches a God-centered perspective of conversion. God is sovereign in election, He glorifies himself in the work of regeneration, and His desired result is for those who repent and believe to cherish Him as their ultimate, soul-satisfying Treasure.

The final theological tenet of Piper's evangelistic ministry is the glorifying witness of the church. Once a person has experienced the joy of life in Christ, he or she is overcome with the desire to spread that ultimate joy, thereby glorifying God by bearing witness to all peoples. In October of 1980, Piper presented a sermon entitled "How to Give Away a G.I.F.T.", in which he stated that the purpose of being chosen by God is "to declare to others His wonderful deeds. God sent Christ to die for our sins, to rise again and to give us great hope in order that we might show and tell others about what He did."⁵⁰ This idea has been expanded and built upon his entire ministry. In 1985, he preached a sermon entitled "Mission: the Gladness of God," where he stated,

God's invitation to the banquet of his eternal joy is sent through the church indiscriminately to all people. . . [Luke 14:16-24]. Is not the point of this parable that the invitation to God's kingdom is sent out through his servant to all indiscriminately? "Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in!" Until Jesus comes back we may assume that the banquet hall is not full. But God aims to fill it. So the charge lies upon the church even now to go out, without any favoritism to race or color or class or creed and "compel" them to come in – that is, to be urgent in our invitations and persuasions. Some will throw away their invitation and go off to their real estate and cows and spouses. But that must not stop us. Find the poor and maimed and blind and lame! Beat the hedges! Look under the bridges! God WILL have his banquet hall full!⁵¹

Throughout his preaching, Piper has issued passionate calls to evangelism just

⁵⁰John Piper, "How to Give Away a G.I.F.T.," a sermon delivered 19 October 1980 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 30 January 2001; available from <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper80/101980e.htm>; Internet.

⁵¹John Piper, "Mission: The Gladness of God," a sermon delivered 22 September 1985 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 30 January 2001; available from <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper85/pn85002a.htm>; Internet.

like the one above. It was in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, that he began to affirm and preach that the call to evangelize often was a call to suffering. In 1991, he preached a message he titled “Spreading Spiritual Power through Persecution” in which he said,

God uses the persecution and suffering of his people to spread the truth of Christ and to bless the world (cf. Lk. 21:12-13). Everyone I know in this church who has been to jail in the cause of defending the life of the unborn would say that great good came from it. And I don’t doubt that the suit against us as a church and against some individuals will serve to advance the cause of Christ and his kingdom.

I want to encourage you this morning from Acts 1:1-8 that God rules over the sufferings of the church and causes them to spread spiritual power and the joy of faith in a lost world. It is not his only way. But it does seem to be a frequent way. God spurs the church into missionary service by the suffering she endures. Therefore we must not judge too quickly the apparent setbacks and tactical “defeats” of the church. If you see things with the eyes of God, the Master strategist (who cannot lose because he is omnipotent), what you see in every setback is the positioning for a greater advance and a greater display of his wisdom and power and love.⁵²

Piper also contends that love is a very important motive for world evangelization. In a 1995 sermon on the mission and vision of Bethlehem, he asks the question, “Where is love in our Mission Statement?” He answers,

The answer is that our Mission Statement is a definition of love. Love is taking whatever pains are necessary, even at the cost of your life, to bring others into the all-satisfying everlasting enjoyment of the supremacy of God. If you just take two words of the Mission and put them together, you will see this: Spread . . . joy. Our Mission is to spread joy. But the only joy that fills the deepest void of our hearts, and the only joy that lasts forever is joy in the supremacy of God. If we give people everything in the world but this, they will not thank us in the end. What is LOVE? To love is to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. The heartbeat of our Mission is love because the heartbeat of our mission is the joy of all peoples in the supremacy of God.⁵³

⁵²John Piper, “Spreading Spiritual Power through Persecution,” a sermon delivered 5 May 1991 at Bethlehem Baptist Church, CD recording (Minneapolis: Desiring God Ministries).

⁵³Piper, “The Mission and Vision of Bethlehem Baptist Church.”

In a sermon entitled “I Am God Almighty, Be Fruitful and Multiply,” Piper links the Great Commission given in Matthew 28:18-19 with God’s words to Jacob in Genesis 35:11 to call the church to loving, passionate evangelism:

“All authority has been given to me,” corresponds to “I am God Almighty.” And “Go therefore and make disciples,” corresponds to “Be fruitful and multiply.” In other words, the people of God are an evangelizing, persuading, recruiting, missionary people because God is God Almighty and Jesus is the absolute authority in the universe. . . . Christianity has from the very beginning been an aggressively evangelistic way of life – for the sake of life, and love. Jesus commanded it as his parting passion for the church: “Go make disciples.” He said just before he ascended into heaven, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and *you shall be my witnesses*” (Acts 1:8). The early disciples of the Lord had this word burning in their hearts, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you” (John 20:21). So they took up their cross and laid down their lives to be fruitful and multiply.

Christianity is a converting religion. It is evangelistic. It is persuasive and expansive and missionary. It is not coercive. It does not use the sword, manipulation or brainwashing. But it does proclaim, and persuade and plead and pray. And where this is not believed and practiced, Christianity ceases to be Christianity and starts to become another religion with another king who no longer says, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply.” When we lose a passion to see people won over to Jesus, we lose Jesus.⁵⁴

Returning once again to the 1996 sermon “Driving Convictions behind World Missions at Bethlehem,” conviction number seven was “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him; and our satisfaction in him is greatest when it expands to embrace others.”⁵⁵ Piper continues, “It is amazing how those who have suffered most in the missionary cause speak in the most lavish terms of the blessing and the joy of it all. . . . We save our lives by giving them away in the cause of the gospel.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴John Piper, “I Am God Almighty, Be Fruitful and Multiply. I Have Other Sheep,” a sermon delivered 3 March 1996 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 30 January 2001; available from <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper96/03-03-96.htm>; Internet.

⁵⁵Piper, “Driving Convictions behind World Missions at Bethlehem.”

⁵⁶Ibid.

This same theme of missionary love, passion, and suffering continues to run through Piper's more recent sermons. Speaking from Isaiah 43:10, he states,

The way people will find out about the truth that God is God is not mainly by dreams, or by reasonings, but by a human testimony. Witnesses – people who have seen and tasted now telling. People telling people: God is God. God is sovereign. Then explaining and persuading. . . . God's aim is to be known and glorified in the whole world. And how does he pursue this aim? Through human witnesses. And the way he recruits and equips these witnesses is to choose them from among the nations, and then grant them to know and trust Him, and to understand that he is God – that he is sovereign. You are my witnesses, my servants whom I have chosen that you might know me and believe me and understand that I am God.⁵⁷

Finally, in a sermon that addressed world evangelization in light of the September 11 attacks on America, Piper encouraged his church all the more to stand against the false religion of Islam and to be willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel:

The issue in the Muslim world today – as in every other religion in every other era – is Who is Jesus, and will we treasure him and trust him and honor him for who he really is? And the reason the matter is urgent with the Muslim peoples is because they give the same wrong answer to this question that some Jews gave in Matthew 16:14 For Islam, Jesus is “one of the prophets.” He is not the Son of God. He is not the crucified and risen Redeemer of fallen man. He is not the Creator of the universe. And every knee will not bow to him and confess that Jesus is Lord of all to the glory of God the Father. Therefore Islam profoundly dishonors Jesus Christ and is not the way to everlasting joy in God.

This is why missions is absolutely necessary. . . . Christ will build his church. But he will do it through the hearing of the gospel of Christ. He will do it through the word carried by human ambassadors. We call them missionaries. One of the most exalted titles in the world. People of whom the world is not worthy – no matter how many struggles they have. Which leads to one last point. How will it be done? Christ's radical way of winning the nations is by the death of himself and the death of his people.⁵⁸

Each of the above quotations underscores the urgent commission given to the church by God for the accomplishment of His glory: passionately love all peoples and

⁵⁷Piper, “I Am the Lord, and Besides Me There Is No Savior.”

⁵⁸Piper, “I Will Build My Church – From All Peoples.”

gladly suffer for Christ's name. His people are His chosen instruments for the accomplishment of his sovereign purpose. Through them, He reaches the nations and manifests the love and sacrifice of Christ. A glorifying witness is the natural joy of a heart that knows God as it's ultimate Treasure. Therefore, to use Piper's own words, missions is the battle cry of Christian Hedonism.

The above material from Piper's sermons proves the thesis that the four theological tenets undergird and drive the evangelistic aspects of his preaching ministry. The sovereignty and supremacy of God is the foundation for every other truth he preaches, for every call to join in the harvest of souls, and for every presentation of the gospel. Piper proclaims that man's depraved affections are inherent to his nature and make him focused upon himself and upon earthly pleasures. Piper likewise preaches that God redeems man from those sinful affections unto an eternal affection for Himself. God is glorified as He elects men to salvation and creates within them a thirst for the joy of God through regeneration. Piper thus calls all men everywhere to repent, believe, and worship God as a holy treasure chest of joy. Finally, based upon who God is and what He will accomplish in the lives of men for His own glory, Piper calls the church to seek greater joy through the expression of God's love among the nations, gladly embracing suffering if God so decrees.

Prayer Ministry

In addressing the thesis for this particular aspect of Piper's evangelistic ministry, this section must first show that prayer does indeed play an important role in the overall evangelistic ministry of Bethlehem Baptist Church. It must then demonstrate that when those prayers are offered, they are founded in the sovereignty and supremacy of

God, they seek God's movement for the conversion of the lost, and they declare the desire for opportunities to express love and bear witness to the lost of the world.

It must be acknowledged at the beginning of this section that Bethlehem Baptist Church is a praying church. Prayer saturates all of their ministries and the call to pray is the first priority of virtually every ministry. This fact became evident through the many staff interviews and through the research conducted for this work. Every staff member interviewed mentioned the primary role of prayer in their particular ministries and in the life of the church.⁵⁹ The home page of the BBC website verifies that there are prayer meetings held every day except Saturday for the various ministries of the church. On Sunday morning alone there are four separate prayer groups that meet before and during the morning worship services.⁶⁰ Piper has noted in interviews that there are specific prayer teams that help him meet people's prayer needs at the end of the services as well as being involved in supporting other BBC ministries.⁶¹ Furthermore, he begins every year with messages on prayer and he seeks to constantly and consistently model prayer to his congregation during the services.⁶²

In the 2002-2003 TBI catalogue, there is an introductory section entitled "Biblical Values Guiding TBI." There is a portion of this section that underscores the

⁵⁹This is a general statement based upon all phone and personal interviews with the staff of Bethlehem. See the bibliography for specific references.

⁶⁰Bethlehem Baptist Church, "Home Page" [on-line]; accessed 2 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/welcome.php>; Internet.

⁶¹John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 22 October 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

⁶²John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 11 December 2000, Minneapolis, notes.

critical role of prayer in the biblical training that Bethlehem offers. It reads,

All our teaching and ministry is bathed in prayer. . . . Calling on God is the way we glorify God in our study. Prayer is our expression of desperate need for God in all study and teaching and preaching and pastoral labor. We cannot study aright without prayer. "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law" (Psalm 119:18). We cannot see spiritual wonder and beauty without God's Spirit helping us in answer to prayer. Prayer is the confession that we are not God but depend on the true God every moment of our study. He must serve us in our serving Him, or we will dishonor Him and destroy ourselves.⁶³

As BBC began looking toward building new education space (which is taking place now), they made it a serious matter of prayer. Multiple, in-depth prayer meetings were held for the program they called "Education for Exultation," and they even published a special daily prayer calendar for the congregation.⁶⁴ Each of the different ministries listed on the BBC home page – the youth ministry, the small group ministry, the children's ministry, the women's ministry, and so forth – all make prayer central to their individual missions. For example, in the document outlining the philosophy of youth ministry for BBC, prayer was listed as the number one strategy for the youth program. It reads,

God is the One who works and moves in a person's life, "turning hearts of stone into hearts of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26), "removing scales from our eyes while shining His light into our hearts" (2 Corinthians 4:4-6), "drawing us to Himself" (John 6:43). We will pray that God will in fact do a great work in the hearts and lives of our kids and their families. Even Jesus, while on earth, amidst the pressures and demands of ministry, spent significant time in prayer (Mark 1:35-39). We strive to become more dependent on prayer, enlisting students and adults alike, to pray specifically and consistently for the total needs of the youth and families at Bethlehem.⁶⁵

⁶³Bethlehem Baptist Church, "The Bethlehem Institute: 2002-2003 Catalogue," Catalogue for church developed training courses, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, n.d.

⁶⁴Bethlehem Baptist Church, "Education for Exultation Daily Prayer Calendar," Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, n.d.

⁶⁵"Youth Ministry Philosophy" [on-line]; accessed 5 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/youthministries/index.htm>; Internet.

Bethlehem holds a prayer meeting the first Tuesday of every month where they fast through lunch and pray for Christ's second coming, and they are currently meeting the first Sunday of every month at 6:30 in the morning to spend an hour in prayer for their building program.⁶⁶ BBC clearly has a highly developed concept of prayer. Though examples of this kind could go on for several more pages, this work must instead turn to demonstrating the manner in which prayer specifically serves evangelism at Bethlehem.

Once again, when each of the staff members was asked about the importance of prayer in regards to the evangelistic ministries of BBC, they all stated in one form or another that these ministries were utterly dependent upon prayer. Piper noted in one interview that evangelism at Bethlehem is "interwoven with prayer."⁶⁷ He said they will often go door-to-door and simply ask people if they can pray for them and their needs. The prayer teams conduct prayer walks in the community to pray for the lost, and they encourage members to be bold in praying with co-workers. For example, if a co-worker is having problems or is suffering from an illness, Piper encourages members to pray with the person right then and there at the workplace as an act of Christian love and as a testimony to the trustworthiness and power of God.⁶⁸

David Livingston is one of the staff members primarily in charge of evangelism mobilization. He leads the Tuesday evening outreach into the community and he also oversees all the small groups for Bethlehem. He noted that soul-winning was the priority

⁶⁶David Livingston, Pastor for Cell Life and Adult Ministries, telephone interview by author, 6 November 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

⁶⁷John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 22 October 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

⁶⁸Ibid.

topic at the morning prayer meetings during the week at Bethlehem. He also noted that before the Tuesday night outreach, they will pray for the salvation of people by name, if they happen to have specific prospects, or they will pray generally for God to open hearts to the gospel if they are going for cold-call visits at the university or at local apartments. At the shepherd's meeting each month (meeting for all cell group leaders), Livingston encourages the leaders to be more active in personal evangelism and they spend time together praying for boldness and for the lost.⁶⁹

Tom Steller, the Pastor for Leadership Development, stated in an interview that virtually every prayer meeting at Bethlehem at some point involves prayer for the lost or for unreached peoples or for missionaries. He noted that even when the prayer meetings are directed toward a specific topic, they always turn in some way to address missions and evangelism.⁷⁰ Kenny Stokes, the Pastor for Urban Missions, notes on the web page for his ministry that, "Urban ministry at Bethlehem grows out of the conviction that even as we continue to be earnest about reaching the peoples of 'the ends of the earth,' we must also be earnest about reaching people of our own city." What does he list as the number one way to spread a passion for God in the city? He says, "Pray. Pray personally, pray corporately, or start a new prayer group."⁷¹

The foreign missions ministry, now headed by Erik Hyatt, is likewise characterized by intense prayer for the lost around the globe. Every missionary sent out

⁶⁹David Livingston, telephone interview, 6 November 2002.

⁷⁰Tom Steller, Pastor for Missions and Leadership Development, telephone interview by author, 4 November 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

⁷¹"Urban Ministries" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/urbanministries/index.htm>; Internet.

by Bethlehem has their own missionary support team that prays for them, for boldness on the field, and for hearts to be receptive to the gospel.⁷² Over a decade ago, BBC adopted its own people group, the Maninka of Guinea, West Africa; the Maninka are the second largest people group in Guinea. Bethlehem has its own “Maninka Advocate Team,” and one of the main responsibilities of this team is making sure that this people group is consistently lifted up in prayer. Their prayer efforts include, “Ensuring the Maninka are included in Bethlehem’s weekly prayer list, publishing a Maninka prayer guide, establishing a Maninka prayer band, and publishing a monthly ‘Maninka Moments’ in the worship folder.”⁷³

As noted previously, all the specialized and age-graded ministries of Bethlehem are dedicated to and dependent upon prayer in their ministries. Yet prayer also plays a critical role in the outreach efforts for these programs. For example, the women’s ministry has a support and prayer ministry that combines mentoring and outreach. It is called “Adventure Girls Prayer Partners.” Following is the description of this ministry taken from the church web site:

Bethlehem has an off-site outreach program for 5th and 6th grade girls held at the Elliot Park Community Center. Each girl will be matched with a Christian adult prayer partner who agrees to pray for her on a regular basis, remember her with a gift on Christmas and her birthday, and keep in contact with her throughout the year. Two scheduled social events will assist the prayer partner and adventure girl in becoming better acquainted. Please join us in prayer and acts of love as we demonstrate the truths of Christ to our Adventure girls.⁷⁴

⁷²“Missionary Support Teams” [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/missionarysupport.htm>; Internet.

⁷³“Maninka Advocate Team” [on-line]; accessed 7 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/maninkaadvocate.htm>; Internet.

⁷⁴“Women’s Ministries” [on-line]; accessed 7 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/womensministries/index.htm>; Internet.

Examples like this one are reflective of most of the ministries at Bethlehem. They are a congregation that is truly dedicated to evangelistic prayer and prayerful outreach. Once again, several more pages could be spent listing the manner in which prayer undergirds the evangelistic ministries at Bethlehem, but this work must proceed with proving the thesis in regard to BBC's prayer ministry.

As noted at the beginning of this section, it must here be demonstrated that when prayers are offered, they are founded in the sovereignty and supremacy of God, they seek God's movement for the conversion of the lost, and they declare the desire for opportunities to express love and bear witness to the lost of the world. An interesting challenge arises at this point because prayer meetings at Bethlehem are not recorded and prayers offered at those times are not written down or transcribed. Thus, the thesis must be proved without reference to an actual evangelistic prayer.

Fortunately, Piper's sermons and church-level (not for publication) writings have much to say about prayer at Bethlehem, and there are enough references in other ministry documents to sufficiently make the point. One article that is of primary importance is one that appeared in Piper's column in the church newsletter. In the June 26, 2002 edition of Piper's column "Fresh Words," he set forth a summary theology of prayer for the congregation that consisted of five points. They are:

1. God created the universe and all that is in it to display the riches of the glory of his grace.
2. Therefore all persons should act in a way that calls attention to the glory of God's grace.
3. The obedience and service of God's people will glorify him most when they consciously and manifestly depend on him for the grace and power to do what they do.
4. Prayer for God's help is one way that God preserves and manifests the depen-

dence of his people on his grace and power. The necessity of prayer is a constant reminder and display of our dependence on God for everything, so that he gets the glory when we get the help.

5. When the Spirit inspires and directs the groanings in our hearts, the ultimate purpose of the universe happens: God gets the glory because God the Spirit creates the groanings in us; God gets the glory because God the Father is the one who hears and performs what the Spirit asks; God gets the glory because God the Son purchased for sinners every blessing they ever receive; and God gets glory because our hearts are made the theater for this divine activity, so that we know and experience God's gracious intercession for us and consciously give him thanks and praise.⁷⁵

It is interesting to note that in one sermon, Piper defined prayer for his congregation simply as "asking God for things." Following is an excerpt from a sermon preached in January of 2000 entitled "Devote Yourselves to Prayer":

But to ponder this we do have to ask what "pray" means. Mainly it means asking God for things. By "things" I don't mean objects – stuff. I mean, generally, whatever your hearts desires or needs. And, of course, what your heart needs most is God – to know him and love him and trust him and obey him. I know that we should come to God with more than asking. We should come confessing sins and giving thanks and praise. In a broad sense, prayer includes all that. But, speaking precisely, prayer is requesting, asking. That's why in Colossians 4:2 it says, "Devote yourselves to prayer . . . with (or in) thanksgiving." Thanking God should always be part of what we do in prayer. But prayer, in the strict sense, means requesting. So I define it as asking God for things.⁷⁶

It then flows from the above quote that two of the "things" that God should be asked for are the salvation of the lost and boldness for His witnesses.

In 1989, as Piper was preparing his congregation for a special outreach service at Northwestern College, he preached a message entitled, "O Lord, Open a Door for the

⁷⁵ John Piper, "A Summary Theology of Prayer," a church newsletter article dated 26 June 2002 [on-line]; accessed 7 November 2002; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/library/fresh_words/2002/062602.html; Internet.

⁷⁶ John Piper, "Devote Yourselves to Prayer," a sermon delivered 9 January 2000 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 7 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/00/010900.html>; Internet.

Word!” from Colossians 4:2-4. Therein he said,

I chose this text for one reason: because next Sunday our aim is to worship at Northwestern College with a lot of people who don't ordinarily go to church and who need to receive Christ as Lord and Savior of their lives. And if I understand this text correctly the human key that might unlock the blessing of God's power and grace in that service is steadfast, watchful, thankful prayer. If we pray steadfastly this week, and with wakefulness, and with expectant thankfulness, this text gives us strong hope that God will open a door for the Word next week so that faith will come to many people.⁷⁷

These types of challenges to pray for the salvation of the lost are found in many sermons.

In “I Am God Almighty, Be Fruitful and Multiply,” he finished the sermon with the following words: “I close with a pastoral plea and prayer: pray for the goal of wisdom in your life and go to the origin of wisdom in your life. The goal of wisdom is to win souls and lead people to the righteousness that is in Jesus. The origin of this wisdom is to let the word of Christ dwell in your richly. Pray and meditate. Pray and meditate. Pray and meditate.”⁷⁸

In addition to Piper's sermons and articles, there are other multiple mentions of prayer in BBC materials that reflect a theology of prayer. For example, on the BBC web site, they have the order of service for the one year anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Entitled “Compassion, Truth, and Hope: Praying to the Good and Sovereign God through Jesus Christ One Year After 9/11,” this service included large blocks of guided prayer performed by staff and elders. Three of the five prayer segments were entitled: “That the Christian Church embrace the goodness and sovereignty of God;” “That Muslims around the world would embrace Christ crucified;” and “That the gospel of

⁷⁷John Piper, “O Lord, Open a Door for the Word!,” a sermon delivered 12 November 1989 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 30 January 2001; available from <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper89/11-12-89.htm>; Internet.

⁷⁸Piper, “I Am God Almighty, Be Fruitful and Multiply.”

the glory of Christ would advance among all nations.”⁷⁹ At Bethlehem’s annual Missions Conference, October 16-27 of this year, significant amounts of time were spent praying for the nations and particularly for the salvation of specific people groups.⁸⁰

Another significant list of prayer requests are set forth in Bethlehem’s “Education for Exultation” focus. Bethlehem has broadened the scope of its prayer ministries as it has undertaken the building of its new education facility. As a result, BBC constantly places before its members a list of prayer points for God to be at work in their community through this new construction. Following are some of the points for which people are called to pray:

Pray that new Muslims in our neighborhoods would taste and see that the Lord is good because Bethlehem children have been educated to exult in GOD.

Pray that many Maninka would hear and believe the gospel of Christ because GOD has raised up a people educated to exult in Him at BBC who went out to Guinea for the sake of the Name.

Pray that many laborers would be educated here to go into the whitened harvest fields in our neighborhoods and among the nations.

Pray that the Great Commission would be completed by children educated at BBC who exult in GOD.

Pray that GOD would use this new building to educate future generations of missionaries to exult in GOD.

Pray for a fresh move of the Holy Spirit in our neighborhood as unreached peoples see the new building going up.

Pray for the construction laborers who will work on-site, that they would see and be captivated by the beauty of Christ.

⁷⁹Bethlehem Baptist Church, “Home Page” [on-line]; accessed 2 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/welcome.php>; Internet.

⁸⁰“Peoples on the Move: Bethlehem Missions Focus 2002” [on-line]; accessed 7 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/peoplesonthemove.htm>; Internet.

Pray that teens would see the wisdom of sowing spiritual seeds which will one day result in spiritual harvesting.⁸¹

It is rare indeed that a church would see construction as one of God's instruments in reaching people with the gospel, yet they pray for exactly that.

Another example of prayer being integral to outreach at Bethlehem is Kenny Stokes' annual report from 2000. After praising God for all the doors to the gospel that were opened through BBC's urban ministry, he calls the congregation to pray for a wide range of outreach opportunities. Those ministries include evangelistic services at the county jail; Jewish evangelism seminars by Jews for Jesus; outreach and support groups for those struggling with homosexuality; urban basketball camps to reach children and youth; homeless ministries; crisis pregnancy ministries; and even Native American ministries. One of the prayer points says, "Pray for Bethlehem to have favor with the new residents in the 178-unit housing complex across the street called East Village. Pray that GOD would open the hearts of many of these new neighbors to Christ."⁸²

All of the above material is representative of the manner in which people at Bethlehem understand the nature of prayer as well as how they practice prayer. Once again, much more material could be presented to draw out the point. However, the above excerpts from Piper's sermons and writings coupled with the specific prayer points from services, programs, and ministries, are sufficient to prove the thesis.

It must first be noted that all prayer is inherently a recognition of God's power and of human dependence upon that power. Scripture affirms this simple fact. Thus,

⁸¹"Education for Exultation Prayer Points" [on-line]; accessed 2 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/e4e/prayer/prayerpoints.htm>; Internet.

⁸²Bethlehem Baptist Church, "2000 Annual Report" (Minneapolis: Bethlehem Baptist Church, January 2001).

given the reality that man is utterly dependent upon God for his very existence, the reality that prayer is commanded and encouraged in Scripture, and the reality that prayer is an essential part of a healthy spiritual life, the first part of the thesis is proved. A Christian prays because, regardless of whether or not he fully grasps the theological weight of his actions, he is dependent upon the sovereign and supreme God. After twenty-two years of Piper's leadership and preaching, the people of Bethlehem realize and live this fact. The materials cited above reflect a deep dependence upon God's infinite strength, the desire for Him to receive all the glory and praise, and the recognition that He alone has the right and ability to orchestrate the events of history. The content and nature of their prayers manifests their espousal of the theological truth that God is sovereign and supreme.

Secondly, the people of Bethlehem recognize that God is sovereign and supreme *in salvation*. As Piper himself has noted, any prayer for lost persons is a recognition of God's sovereignty in effectual calling.⁸³ Furthermore, both Scripture and logic dictate that if God must draw a person to salvation, then that person must be unable, in their own strength and resolve, to respond to the gospel. Thus, the prayer for God to save the unsaved inherently recognizes man's depravity and the need for God to overcome man's depraved affections through regeneration. The people of BBC recognize this truth and therefore pray for God to open the hearts of unbelievers, for God to open lost eyes to the reality of Christ, and for God to open doors for the gospel among the nations. They do not, however, simply pray for conversion (in the typical, evangelical sense). Like true Christian Hedonists, they pray for Muslims to "taste and see that the Lord is good," they pray for people to "exult" in Christ and thereby experience the fulness of joy that comes

⁸³John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 51-53.

through Him, and they pray for people to be “captivated by the beauty of Christ.”

Finally, the people of Bethlehem pray for God to save people *through them*.

They recognize that they are God’s ordained means of reaching people with the life-saving truth of the gospel. Thus, they pray to labor in the harvest, to raise up missionaries for the nations, and to find favor among the lost surrounding them. Whether it is through door-to-door evangelism at the university, starting a mentoring program at the local community center, or being active in supporting missionaries on the other side of the world, the people of Bethlehem take personal responsibility for the Great Commission, and it is reflected in their prayers. They seek, through their intercessions, to glorify God as faithful witnesses of His glory. Given this final fact, the thesis is proved in regard to the prayer ministry of Bethlehem Baptist.

Discipleship/The Bethlehem Institute

The goal of this section is to show that the four theological tenets are the basis for all evangelism training that takes place through the discipleship programs of Bethlehem Baptist Church. For the context of this work, discipleship includes any formal teaching that takes place outside the worship services. Bethlehem Baptist Church operates with basically five categories of discipleship. First, there are congregational teaching times led by Piper and other members of the pastoral staff. The most prominent example of this type of discipleship is the Wednesday evening study times most often led by Piper. Services associated with special emphasis weeks would also fit under this category. For example, each year in the Fall, Bethlehem has an annual missions focus with special

services and teaching times led by guest speakers.⁸⁴

The second category of discipleship at Bethlehem is Sunday School. At this point in time, much of the Sunday School ministry is suspended while the new education facility is completed. Under normal circumstances, however, Bethlehem offers Sunday morning Sunday School classes in a typical age-graded format for preschool through youth. There are normally classes for adults on Sunday morning as well, but they do not include all adults because Bethlehem has simply not had the space to accommodate a complete adult Sunday School ministry. Thus, the classes offered to adults on Sunday morning do not have a unified curriculum and are often topical in nature.⁸⁵ For example, Sunday morning is when the “Getting Acquainted with Bethlehem” class is offered. It is a “14-week, non-sequential, continuous cycle of informational classes” that guests and visitors can attend to become familiar with the staff and ministries of Bethlehem.⁸⁶ There is also a single adult class, a general Bible study class for single and married adults of all ages, a couple senior adult classes, an international class to promote cross-cultural friendships and growth in the Christian faith, and a Japanese Evangelical Fellowship.⁸⁷

⁸⁴The break down of discipleship into five categories is a method for addressing BBC’s ministry of discipleship developed solely by this author. Piper and his staff do not address their discipleship according to these five categories. However, the material in these categories is taken directly from ministry discussions with Piper and his staff. Three primary sources are the phone interview with John Piper dated 16 April 2002, the phone interview with Tom Steller dated 4 November 2002, and the phone interview with David Livingston dated 6 November 2002.

⁸⁵John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 16 April 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

⁸⁶“Adult Sunday School” [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from http://www.bbcmpls.org/adultministries/adult_ss_desc.htm; Internet.

⁸⁷Ibid.

The third category of discipleship classes is cell-groups. This category is composed of the groups that mainly meet off-site in homes and locations at times other than Sunday morning. There are over eighty small groups at Bethlehem, and they are where a large portion of the congregation gets involved in personalized ministry. The groups are organized and coordinated through David Livingston, the Pastor for Cell Life and Adult Ministries, and they are described as follows:

Small groups are the basic units for Christian Community at Bethlehem. These groups are made up of 3-15 people in which the body-life of the church is lived out through the development of intimate relationships; through the discovery and use of spiritual gifts; through the discipline of discipleship; through going “out-side the camp” (Heb. 13:13) to bring others to Jesus and through making Christ supreme in every part of our lives. It is within a small group such as this that the ministry of Bethlehem and the Body of Christ becomes most effective in our lives.⁸⁸

Once again, there is no unified curriculum for cell-groups; the leaders are free to follow God’s leading in choosing material as long as they teach in accordance with the doctrinal views of the church. The groups pray together, study together, confess and have accountability, and experience pastoral care through their leaders. These “shepherding” leaders are then held accountable by the elders and staff.⁸⁹ Shepherding leaders initially go through a five-hour TBI training class to learn the basics of leading a small group, then they meet monthly with Livingston for encouragement, discussion, and accountability.⁹⁰

⁸⁸“Small Groups” [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/smallgroups/index.htm>; Internet.

⁸⁹John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 16 April 2002, Minneapolis, notes. Some of this information can also be found in “Small Groups” [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/smallgroups/index.htm>; Internet.

⁹⁰David Livingston, Pastor for Cell Life and Adult Ministries, telephone interview by author, 6 November 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

The fourth category of classes is what this author calls “specialized group ministries.” Classes that fit under this category are classes that can augment or overlap the cell group ministry by serving specialized functions. Steller has noted that BBC has Precept Bible Study classes, Beth Moore studies, parenting programs, men’s discipleship groups, and a variety of others.⁹¹ These groups do not necessarily emphasize pastoral care, and they can be larger than normal cell groups.

The Bethlehem Institute is the fifth category of discipleship at BBC, and it is the heart of Bethlehem’s teaching ministry. Steller, the Dean of TBI, notes that while TBI is certainly not the sum total of all teaching and discipleship at Bethlehem, it does teach the core theology in which the elders want the congregation to be trained.⁹² Furthermore, while evangelism is certainly encouraged and practiced through a variety of Bethlehem’s groups and ministries, TBI offers the only evangelism training course in the whole church. Thus, the remainder of this section will be focused upon The Bethlehem Institute, and in particular, the evangelism training class.

TBI was established in 1998 in an effort to consolidate several of Bethlehem’s existing teaching ministries.⁹³ The program currently consists of three different training tracks. Track one, entitled “The Discipleship Program for Leadership Development,” is for lay people currently involved in or seeking to be involved in ministry leadership at Bethlehem. It is also “for missionary and ministry candidates who do not need to study at

⁹¹Tom Steller, Pastor for Missions and Leadership Development, telephone interview by author, 4 November 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

⁹²Steller, telephone interview, 4 November 2002.

⁹³Bethlehem Baptist Church, “1998 Annual Report” (Minneapolis: Bethlehem Baptist Church, 1999).

the M.A. level.”⁹⁴ The core curriculum of Track One consists of five courses of study:

1. Bible Study Methods (30 weekly sessions)
2. Unity of the Bible (30 weekly sessions)
3. Perspectives on the World Christian Movement (15 weekly sessions)
4. Practical Theology Seminars (5 hours each, offered at various times)
5. Issues in Spiritual Leadership Seminars (5 hours each, offered at various times)⁹⁵

Courses one and two cost \$100 per person. Course three costs \$350 for credit or \$185 for audit. Courses four and five are free except for book purchase.⁹⁶ It is in these final two courses that the particular theology of Bethlehem is set forward. Seminars in the fourth course include those on Christian Hedonism, Future Grace, TULIP (Calvinism), urban ministry, racial harmony, and the evangelism training class, “Good Seed on Fertile Soil: The Winning and Discipling of the Lost.”⁹⁷ The fifth course includes seminars on biblical eldership, worship, prayer and fasting, suffering for the sake of the body, and shepherd’s training for small groups.

TBI Track Two is called “The Apprenticeship Program for Vocational Elders.” This track “is designed as a two-year program for those training for vocational ministry as pastors, missionaries, or other full-time vocational Christian workers at the elder level.”⁹⁸ Students are only allowed to enroll in this program if they are male and if they intend to complete the entire curriculum.⁹⁹ Furthermore, students must have an aptitude in biblical

⁹⁴Bethlehem Baptist Church, “The Bethlehem Institute: 2002-2003 Catalogue,” 9.

⁹⁵Ibid., 9-10.

⁹⁶Ibid., 33.

⁹⁷Ibid., 9-10.

⁹⁸Ibid., 10.

⁹⁹Ibid., 10-13. In regard to allowing only males in Track Two, the catalogue states: “Our understanding of the Biblical teaching on this matter is that God has ordained

Greek prior to enrollment, they must commit to five hours each week for supervised ministry involvement and mentoring under one of the staff members, and they must regularly attend services at Bethlehem.¹⁰⁰ This track is structured more like a seminary curriculum built upon Bethlehem's unique theology. It is equivalent to forty-seven semester units of graduate study and is designed to be completed in two years. The tuition for the whole program is a one-time fee of \$4,600, not including books or living expenses.¹⁰¹

Track Three of TBI is a B.A. and M.A. program in World Christian Foundations. Designed by Ralph Winter and the staff at the USCWM, the goal of the curriculum "is to develop a comprehensive worldview, centered around God's central plan for history, namely to glorify God by blessing all of the nations through the seed of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3)."¹⁰² Also designed to be completed in two years, students who want to earn the B.A. or M.A. must enroll at Hope International University in Fullerton, California, William Carey International University in Pasadena, California, or Northwestern College in Roseville, Minnesota. This course of study combines biblically based correspondence courses with on-site accountability and mentoring with Bethlehem leaders.¹⁰³ It is open to males and females, and fees vary dependent upon which institution enrollment is through. Students who do not want the degree can study through the

distinct, complementary roles for men and women in the church and that men, not women, bear the responsibility of the office and function of elder" (13).

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 11-12.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 33.

¹⁰²Ibid., 13.

¹⁰³Ibid., 14-15.

certificate program at reduced costs and paperwork.¹⁰⁴

The Bethlehem Institute offers the only evangelism training course taught at Bethlehem. It is one of the practical theology seminars taught in the first two tracks. As mentioned earlier, this focal evangelism course is “Good Seed on Fertile Soil: The Winning and Discipling of the Lost.” David Livingston teaches the class twice a year to about fifty students each time.¹⁰⁵ He is also the one who developed the curriculum for it. The curriculum centers around acquainting students with Bethlehem’s unique gospel presentation as set forth in the tract “Quest for Joy.”¹⁰⁶ Written by John Piper, the tract is a concise representation of his theology of evangelism.¹⁰⁷ It reflects his Christian Hedonism and is based upon a series of sermons he preached at the beginning of 1989.¹⁰⁸ The full text of the “Quest for Joy” tract is included in appendix one of this work.

“Quest for Joy” is the core expression of the gospel that undergirds, informs, and flows out of every evangelistic ministry at Bethlehem. Whenever the gospel is proclaimed or taught, whether it is through sermons, lectures, articles, pamphlets, or conversations, the theological truths set forward in this tract are evident. The fact that the church’s outreach is defined and driven by these truths is due to Piper’s profound theological influence over a period of twenty-two years. Whenever courses or group

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 15-34.

¹⁰⁵David Livingston, telephone interview, 6 November 2002.

¹⁰⁶John Piper, “Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths,” tract distributed by Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, n.d.

¹⁰⁷John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, interview by author, 14 May 2001, Minneapolis, tape recording.

¹⁰⁸See Bibliography.

studies at Bethlehem turn to the subject of evangelism, the truths from “Quest for Joy” figure prominently. For example, Kenny Stokes, Pastor for Urban Evangelism, encourages everyone involved in his ministry area to take the evangelism training course and become acquainted with the “Quest for Joy” material. In his TBI course “Introduction to Urban Ministry,” he then teaches his students to use the same “Quest for Joy” material in an E2 context.¹⁰⁹ In a similar manner, “Quest for Joy” is the basis for presenting the gospel in all the other evangelistic ministries of Bethlehem Baptist Church; methods may vary due to context, but the theological fundamentals remain the same.¹¹⁰

The “Quest for Joy” tract is the key to Bethlehem’s evangelism training ministry and to their outreach programs; it is how the people of BBC present the gospel. Thus, if it can be shown that the four theological tenets are represented in this tract, then the thesis will be validated for this section on evangelism training and for the next section on church outreach. Therefore, attention must turn to the content of the tract.

At the outset, it must be understood that some aspects of the four theological tenets will not be present in “Quest for Joy” because it is a gospel presentation meant for lost people. Thus, concepts like election, worship, regeneration, and all of the elements of the glorifying witness of the church will not be openly recognizable. Each of the six points

¹⁰⁹Kenny Stokes, Pastor for Urban Ministries, telephone interview by author, 8 November 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

¹¹⁰Bethlehem has a Missionary Nurture Program through which they raise up and train missionaries. It will be discussed more at length in the following section. What is important to note at this point is that missionary candidates are to be regularly involved in the life of the church and they must complete TBI Track One or Track Two. If a student is enrolled in Track Three, they must additionally complete the Practical Theology course and the Issues in Spiritual Leadership course from Track One. Thus, missionary candidates are fully versed in Bethlehem’s unique theology, particularly their theology of evangelism. See “Nurture Program” [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/nurture.htm>; Internet.

of the tract will now be examined in turn to prove the thesis.

The first point in the tract is “God created us for His glory.” After quoting Isaiah 43:6-7, it states,

God made us to magnify His greatness – the way telescopes magnify stars. He created us to put his goodness and truth and beauty and wisdom and justice on display. The greatest display of God’s glory comes from deep delight in all that he is. This means that God gets the praise and we get the pleasure. God created us so that he is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.¹¹¹

The “Quest for Joy” evangelism training packet goes a step further by helping students explain why the tract begins with this particular point:

One reason to start our “Quest for Joy” with a statement of God’s purpose is that discovering why you exist is a good means of finding fulfillment and happiness. If you believe there is a Creator God (or will grant it for the sake of argument) then you can see you are on a dead end street if your purposes in life are different than the purposes of the One who made you and rules the world.¹¹²

The packet also helps students define God’s glory:

God’s glory is the sum of all His perfections. Add up all God’s excellencies, His power and beauty and wisdom and goodness and worth; together the Bible calls this shining reputation (fame) of God His “glory.” God’s loves to put His glory on display. He delights to look at His own greatness and show it off to others.¹¹³

The sovereignty and supremacy of God is set forth clearly in this first point and additionally through the explanatory remarks in the teaching packet. Piper’s tract does not begin with “God loves you,” or “God has a wonderful plan for your life.” It does not make what God can do for man it’s starting point; the primary focus of the first point is God. It affirms God as Creator, it lists His awesome character traits, and it states that His

¹¹¹Piper, “Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths.”

¹¹²“Quest for Joy: How to Pursue Your Happiness in God,” evangelism training packet distributed by Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, n.d., 7.

¹¹³Ibid., 8.

purpose is the pursuit of His own glory through His creation. The explanatory comments in the student's packet further elaborate on His glory, His rule over the world, His perfection, and His fame. Man is mentioned, but it is clear that man's purpose holds a secondary role to God's purpose. The sovereignty and supremacy of God is clearly the theological concept conveyed by this first point.

The second point of the tract is "every human should live for God's glory."

After quoting 1 Corinthians 10:31, it states,

If God made us for his glory, it is clear that we should live for his glory. Our duty comes from his design. So our first obligation is to show God's value by being satisfied with all that he is for us. This is the essence of loving God (Matthew 22:37) and trusting him (1 John 5:3-4) and being thankful to him (Psalm 100:2-4). It is the root of all true obedience, especially loving others (Colossians 1:4-5).¹¹⁴

The student's packet once again offers valuable insight:

Acts 17:25 says this about God, "He is not served by human hands as though he needed anything." So, the issue for humans is how they are to go about glorifying a God who is perfect, complete, all-sufficient, infinitely great and glorious, and who didn't create us to meet his needs, because he doesn't have any needs. How do you bring glory to such a Being?

...when He created us for for His glory, He also created us for our own joy. How so? Because the way He seeks to be glorified in us is by making us satisfied in Him. All of the duties required of us are not burdensome or oppressive. They are no heavy law. They are pure pleasure . . . the pleasures of loving the One who is beautiful, filling up on His goodness, depending on His power, being thankful for His generosity, and obedient to His utterly reliable wisdom!

This is freedom and joy. God is a God of infinite love because He wills to share all that He is with us for our enjoyment and for His glory.¹¹⁵

This second point reiterates many of the truths set forth in the first point, but the focus has shifted to man. Given God's supremacy and purpose in creation, man's duty is then to

¹¹⁴Piper, "Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths."

¹¹⁵"Quest for Joy: How to Pursue Your Happiness in God," evangelism training packet, 11, 13.

honor God with every ounce of his being. He does not accomplish this goal by giving God anything; God is perfect and needs nothing. Man accomplishes his purpose of giving God glory by being utterly delighted, satisfied, obedient, and thankful to God. This point basically expresses the hedonistic, God-glorifying life man was meant for. Men were created to be Christian Hedonists – the purpose recovered in conversion. Thus, in addition to affirming the supremacy of God again, the second point of the presentation is a foreshadowed expression of the third theological tenet: conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist.

The third point begins, “all of us have failed to glorify God as we should.”

After citing Romans 3:23, it states,

What does it mean to “fall short of the glory of God?” It means that none of us has trusted and treasured God the way we should. We have not been satisfied with his greatness and walked in his ways. We have sought our satisfaction in other things, and treated them as more valuable than God, which is the essence of idolatry (Romans 1:21-23). Since sin came into the world we have all been deeply resistant to having God as our all-satisfying treasure (Ephesians 2:3). This is an appalling offense to the greatness of God (Jeremiah 2:12-13).¹¹⁶

The student packet elaborates:

This is what it means to fall short of the glory of God – to exchange it for something else. God offers us the glory of His beauty and strength and generosity and wisdom for our enjoyment, and we sniff at it and fall in love with money. He offers us Himself as our infinite treasure and we trade Him in on a secondhand pleasure that will leave us empty in the hour of death – and probably long before.

The reason we need a Savior is not because we have offended man’s laws but because we have insulted God. We have profaned His name by indifference and distrust and ingratitude and disobedience. And in all of this we have exchanged our joy for the dead-end street of judgement.¹¹⁷

The student packet rightly addresses the fourth truth along with the third. The fourth

¹¹⁶Piper, “Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths.”

¹¹⁷“Quest for Joy: How to Pursue Your Happiness in God,” evangelism training packet, 18.

point is, “all of us are subject to God’s just condemnation.” It cites Romans 6:23 and then states,

We have all belittled the glory of God. How? By preferring other things above him. By our ingratitude, distrust and disobedience. So God is just in shutting us out from the enjoyment of his glory forever. “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). The word “hell” is used in the New Testament twelve times – eleven times by Jesus himself. It is not a myth created by dismal and angry preachers. It is a solemn warning from the Son of God who died to deliver sinners from its curse. We ignore it at great risk. If the Bible stopped here in its analysis of the human condition, we would be doomed to a hopeless future. However, this is not where it stops.¹¹⁸

Points three and four together speak boldly of man’s depravity and his resultant condemnation. Man’s sinful nature is expressed in the fact that he is “deeply resistant” to treasuring God, and he is “doomed” and “hopeless” if left to his own strength. The above statements also demonstrate the way that man’s depravity is expressed in terms of the affections of his heart. Man has not “treasured” God; he has not been “satisfied” with God; and he “falls in love” with things of the world rather than God. In “preferring other things above him,” man is steeped in idolatry and therefore completely offensive to his Creator. These two truths illustrate very clearly the theological tenet of the depraved affections of man, and they do so in relation to God. As Piper stated in the previous chapter, “The terrible condition of man’s heart will never be recognized by people who assess it only in relation to other men. Romans 14:23 makes plain that depravity is our condition in relation to God primarily, and only secondarily in relation to man. Unless we start here, we will never grasp the totality of our natural depravity.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸Piper, “Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths.”

¹¹⁹John Piper, “TULIP: What The Pastoral Staff at Bethlehem Believe about the Five Points of Calvinism,” pamphlet distributed by Desiring God Ministries, Minneapolis, 2000, 5.

The fifth truth of “Quest for Joy” is, “God sent his only Son Jesus to provide eternal life and joy.” The point continues by quoting 1 Timothy 1:15 and then stating,

The good news is that Christ died for sinners like us. And he rose physically from the dead to validate the saving power of his death and to open the gates of eternal life and joy (1 Corinthians 15:20). This means God can acquit guilty sinners and still be just (Romans 3:25-26). “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). Coming home to God is where all deep and lasting satisfaction is found.¹²⁰

The explanatory notes in the student packet once again provide valuable insight:

God has forgiven sinners by the millions. He has acquitted the guilty. He has pardoned criminals who deserve punishment. Every time God passes over our sins He seems to diminish His own glory by declaring, in effect, that sinners can get away with opposing His beauty and generosity and truth and wisdom. How then can God acquit guilty sinners like us and still be a righteous judge?

He put forward His own Son to die, and in that death, God poured out the full measure of His wrath against all the sins of every person who would ever “have faith in Jesus.” This demonstrated once and for all that God is not indifferent to the scorn we have brought to His glory. When Christ died he died to repair the injury we have done to God’s name and God’s honor. He vindicated the righteousness of God in the salvation of sinners. If Christ had not died in our place the righteousness of God could only be vindicated in one other way – by our eternal condemnation.¹²¹

In this point of the gospel presentation, the underlying theological tenets are the sovereignty and supremacy of God and, to a lesser degree, conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist. Conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist flavors this fifth truth as seen in the reference to “eternal life and joy,” as well as the mention of “deep and lasting satisfaction” through Christ. The primary focus, however, is upon what holy God has done to preserve His glory in creation and redeem mankind: He sent His Son to vindicate His righteousness and justice in the salvation of sinners. Through Christ, God’s

¹²⁰Piper, “Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths.”

¹²¹“Quest for Joy: How to Pursue Your Happiness in God,” evangelism training packet, 24-25.

glory is preserved and eternal life and joy are accomplished for God's people. These truths reflect what was cited earlier in regards to the supremacy of God in the glory of Christ:

When Jesus died, he glorified the Father's name and saved his Father's people. And since the Father has overflowing pleasure in the honor of his name, and since he delights with unbounded joy in the election of a sinful people for himself, how then shall he not delight in the bruising of his Son by which these two magnificent divine joys are reconciled and made one!¹²²

The sixth and final truth of "Quest for Joy" is "the benefits purchased by the death of Christ belong to those who repent and trust Him." Acts 3:19 and 16:31 are cited, and then the tract continues,

"Repent" means to turn from all the deceitful promises of sin. "Faith" means being satisfied with all that God promises to be for us in Jesus. "He who believes in me," Jesus says, "shall never thirst" (John 6:35). We do not earn our salvation. We cannot merit it (Romans 4:4-5). It is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is a free gift (Romans 3:24). We will have it if we cherish it enough to receive it and treasure it above all things (Matthew 13:44). When we do that God's aim in creation is accomplished: He is glorified in us and we are satisfied in him – forever.¹²³

As the presentation concludes, there are two additional paragraphs. The first asks the question, "Does this make sense to you?" It explains, "Do you desire the kind of gladness that comes from being satisfied with all that God is for you in Jesus? If so, then God is at work in your life."¹²⁴ The second paragraph asks, "What should you do?", and then it provides the answer:

Turn from the deceitful promises of sin. Call upon Jesus to save you from the guilt and punishment and bondage. "All who call upon the name of the Lord

¹²²John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditation on God's Delight in Being God*, rev. and expanded (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 176-77.

¹²³Piper, "Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths."

¹²⁴*Ibid.*

will be saved" (Romans 10:13). Start banking your hope on all that God is for you in Jesus. Break the power of sin's promises by faith in the superior satisfaction of God's promises. Begin reading the Bible to find his precious and very great promises, which can set you free (2 Peter 1:3-4). Find a Bible believing church and begin to worship and grow together with other people who treasure Christ above all things (Philippians 3:7).¹²⁵

The student training packet once again expands upon the ideas presented in the tract:

The death of Jesus for sinners was not designed to save people apart from a personal response. Though Jesus' ransoming death contains an infinite worth, sufficient to redeem all sinners, and though all are invited to come, it does not pay for a person who will not come. It is absolutely necessary that you respond to Jesus in order to have your sins forgiven and in order to have eternal life. . .¹²⁶

The packet also explains the nature of God's glory in salvation by expounding upon the concept of grace:

The highest expression of God's glory is His grace (both His leniency to forgive our sin, as well as His power to do His will). You can see this by looking again at Ephesians 2:8, "By GRACE are you saved through faith." Now combine this with Ephesians 1:5 that says God, "... predestined us to be his children according to the good pleasure of his will unto the praise of the glory of his grace." Everything He has done in salvation is aimed at winning praise from us for THE GLORY OF HIS GRACE.

Once we get a handle on this we will realize why some things are required for our salvation and some are not. God requires of us things that glorify His grace, and rejects things that would glorify our self-sufficiency or glorify sin. . . It glorifies Jesus when you believe the truth about him, and it glorifies him when you trust him as a reliable person. Both kinds of faith are necessary to honor the Son.¹²⁷

The sixth truth of the tract, along with the concluding paragraphs and the student packet material, express what is involved in trusting Christ: repentance and faith.

¹²⁵Ibid.

¹²⁶"Quest for Joy: How to Pursue Your Happiness in God," evangelism training packet, 28.

¹²⁷Ibid., 29-30.

This call to repentant faith is one of several facets that flow from the tenet, “conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist.” The definitions of repentance and faith are taken directly from Piper’s treatment of conversion in the text, *Desiring God*. The sixth truth also stresses that salvation is not earned or merited, it is a gift from God. More importantly, it reflects Piper’s view that true conversion is the creation of a Christian Hedonist because it states that one must receive Christ as their “Treasure”: “We will have it if we cherish it enough to receive it and treasure it above all things (Matthew 13:44)”¹²⁸ The call to find ultimate satisfaction in Christ is also clearly communicated: “Start banking your hope on all that God is for you in Jesus. Break the power of sin’s promises by faith in the superior satisfaction of God’s promises.”¹²⁹ Repentant faith and trusting Christ as one’s Treasure fulfills God’s purpose: “He is glorified in us and we are satisfied in him – forever.”¹³⁰

Though it does not figure as prominently in the tract, the comments in the student’s packet more clearly reflect the theology of the sovereignty and supremacy of God behind this sixth biblical truth. The statements stress personal response, but Piper’s view of the extent of the atonement shines through in the sentence, “Though Jesus’ ransoming death contains an infinite worth, sufficient to redeem all sinners, and though all are invited to come, it does not pay for a person who will not come.”¹³¹ The other aspect of the sovereignty and supremacy of God that is quite clear is the glory of Christ:

¹²⁸Piper, “Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths.”

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹“Quest for Joy: How to Pursue Your Happiness in God,” evangelism training packet, 28.

God requires of us things that glorify His grace, and rejects things that would glorify our self-sufficiency or glorify sin. . . It glorifies Jesus when you believe the truth about him, and it glorifies him when you trust him as a reliable person. Both kinds of faith are necessary to honor the Son.¹³²

The preceding quote directly reflects the statement made in *Let the Nations Be Glad*:

“God’s will is to glorify his Son by making him the conscious focus of all saving faith.”¹³³

Thus, everything accomplished in salvation is for the glory and praise of God, and faith in Christ alone allows humanity to delight in that glory.

The foregoing discussion proves that “Quest for Joy” is in fact a practical presentation of the gospel message based upon three of the four theological tenets listed in the thesis. Nevertheless, the role of the fourth tenet in the discipleship ministry must still be established for the thesis to be true. As noted previously, the glorifying witness of the church is not a component of the “Quest for Joy” presentation because the tract is intended for lost people. Other aspects of Bethlehem’s discipleship ministry, however, demonstrate the important role of the fourth tenet.

Bethlehem Baptist constantly encourages its members to be faithful witnesses and to take advantage of the evangelistic opportunities available to them through their individual lives and through the church. Piper’s particular theology of evangelism is constantly set before the congregation through sermons, and all three tracks of the TBI program reflect a solid desire to train theologically grounded and missionary minded Christians. Steller noted in his 2001 annual report,

Hundreds of people continue to take Track One courses designed to impart a God-centered World Christian mindset and the ability to be inductive learners from the

¹³²Ibid., 29-30.

¹³³John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 115.

Scripture for life. The Perspectives on the World Christian Movement course (January - April) was a powerful manifestation of God's delight in awakening people to His global purpose. Under Jeff Anderson's annointed leadership and the phenomenal coordinating team he pulled together, a record number of students were impacted by this course – 240! This not only doubled Bethlehem's previous record, but it was the largest Perspectives class in the 25 year history of the Perspectives movement.¹³⁴

In addition to the main evangelism course, Piper also teaches another foundational seminar through TBI called "Suffering for the Sake of the Body: The Pursuit of People through Pain." In this course, he teaches the same reasons for Christian suffering outlined in *Let the Nations Be Glad*: to embolden other Christians in their witness, to embody the love and sufferings of Christ to unbelievers, to "reposition" Christian witnesses into places they otherwise would not have gone, and "To magnify the power of Christ in our weaknesses, and the sufficiency and surpassing value of Christ over all worldly comforts and pleasures."¹³⁵

All of the aforementioned factors taken together confirm the fact that Bethlehem Baptist Church does indeed seek to raise up and equip globally minded Christians to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. Therefore, the glorifying witness of the church is an undergirding and motivating theological tenet in the discipleship ministry of BBC. Given the fact that "Quest for Joy" is the foundation for all outreach training at Bethlehem, it is then evident that all four theological tenets do indeed define and drive the evangelistic training ministries of the church.

¹³⁴Bethlehem Baptist Church, "2001 Annual Report," Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, January 2002.

¹³⁵John Piper, "Suffering for the Sake of the Body: The Pursuit of People Through Pain," pamphlet distributed by Desiring God Ministries, Minneapolis, 2000, 35-37.

Church Outreach

Given that “Quest for Joy” embodies the foundational theology that is the basis of all of Bethlehem’s evangelistic ministries, the premise of this work has largely been proved for this section as well as for the next section on Piper’s writing ministry. What remains is to discuss the unique embodiments of the theology in the various outreach ministries in order to more fully demonstrate the truth of the thesis.

Bethlehem has a strong commitment to missions. One policy document noted that thirty-three cents of every dollar given to the overall budget goes toward the total missions program of the church (home, urban, and foreign missions).¹³⁶ The call to support missions goes much further than just money, however, as there are numerous programs in the church through which people are either involved directly in outreach and missions, or they are active in support and prayer for outreach and missions. As those various ministries are here examined, Bethlehem’s outreach programs will be broken down into two different contexts for discussion: local outreach and global outreach. Local outreach encompasses Bethlehem’s outreach ministries within their context as a church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States of America. Global outreach encompasses all outreach ministries to nations and peoples outside the United States.

It must be noted at the onset that Bethlehem has separate staff members to coordinate outreach according to the E1, E2, and E3 definitions of evangelism. David Livingston, the Associate Pastor for Cell Life and Adult Ministries, is chiefly responsible for E1 evangelism – reaching those culturally and ethnically similar to the predominantly white/European make-up of Bethlehem. Kenny Stokes, Associate Pastor for Urban

¹³⁶“Career Missions Policy” [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/careermissions.htm>; Internet.

Ministries, has responsibility for E2 evangelism – reaching those who are ethnically and culturally different, yet living and learning in the American language and culture context. Erik Hyatt, Minister of Missions, has responsibility for coordinating E3 evangelism – cross-cultural, trans-national ministry outside the American context.¹³⁷ E1 and E2 evangelism will be treated under Local Outreach. E3 evangelism will be treated under Global Outreach.

Local Outreach

E1 evangelism under Livingston and E2 evangelism under Stokes are addressed here together because their ministries at Bethlehem often overlap. Livingston coordinates many of the outreaches into the surrounding neighborhoods, yet the neighborhoods around Bethlehem are very ethnically diverse. Stokes noted in his 2000 annual report,

Over 40,000 people live within a few miles of us here on the near south side of Minneapolis. One-half to one-third live below the poverty line. Some are legally employed, some illegally employed and some unemployed. Over 10,000 are children under 18 years old and many of them live with only one parent. They represent over 40 different ethnic groups, ranging from African Americans to East African Somalis. In a very real sense the nations of the world are right here in Minneapolis. Minneapolis has never been so ethnically diverse.¹³⁸

Thus, outreach in this context means that almost every evangelistic ministry at Bethlehem must be familiar with E2 perspectives and approaches.

Called to Bethlehem in 1987, Livingston has been at Bethlehem through most of their growing pains. By virtue of his title and assigned responsibilities, he not only has the privilege of going and sharing the gospel, he also is responsible for assimilating new

¹³⁷Kenny Stokes, Pastor for Urban Ministries, interview by author, 14 May 2001, Minneapolis, tape recording.

¹³⁸Bethlehem Baptist Church, “2000 Annual Report,” Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, January 2001.

adult converts into the church body. Thus, he will often do follow-up classes for new converts (also based on “Quest for Joy”), coordinate the quarterly New Members Dinner, and oversee many of the domestic ministries conducted by Bethlehem.¹³⁹ As of the beginning of 2002, BBC had 16 couples and 4 individuals serving in American domestic ministries in churches, Campus Crusade for Christ, the Navigators, Mission America, InnerChange, and a variety of other organizations.¹⁴⁰

In terms of E1 evangelism, there are several programs and ministries that are foundational to Bethlehem’s local outreach. First, Livingston has led a Tuesday evening visitation ministry for the past four years that is primarily door-to-door evangelism. While they do sometimes follow-up new prospects and converts at these times, their main focus is sharing the gospel in the neighborhoods around Bethlehem during warmer weather and in the apartment buildings during colder weather.¹⁴¹ There is never a shortage of prospects in this regard as one of the largest apartment buildings in Minnesota is just on the other side of the interstate; approximately 5,000 people live in this one building alone.¹⁴² Livingston’s leadership and example has also led the senior high students and the college students at Bethlehem to undertake door-to-door witnessing at the universities and in the up-town areas.¹⁴³

A second major avenue for outreach is Bethlehem’s “Harvesting Services.”

¹³⁹BBC, “2001 Annual Report,” 7-10.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 10.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 9.

¹⁴²David Livingston, Pastor for Cell Life and Adult Ministries, telephone interview by author, 6 November 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

¹⁴³BBC, “2000 Annual Report,” 18.

Over the past five years, BBC has held special services at Thanksgiving and at Easter specifically for evangelistic purposes. For the Easter service of 2001 they used their own sanctuary, and for Thanksgiving of 2001 they rented out the Minneapolis Convention Center.¹⁴⁴ They encourage their members to invite lost friends, family members, and co-workers to these special services for the purpose of exposing them to the gospel. A critical fact to note here is that Livingston teaches the evangelism training class at BBC in conjunction with the harvest services. He teaches the first class just before Easter each year and the second just before Thanksgiving.¹⁴⁵ Members are therefore trained in presenting the gospel and excited about witnessing at a time when they are especially encouraged to be reaching out to the lost. God has blessed these efforts with good results. In 2001 alone, almost ninety people professed first-time faith in Christ as a result of these services.¹⁴⁶ Thus, the theology of evangelism represented by the tract and communicated through Piper's evangelistic sermons proves once again to be integral to Bethlehem's outreach ministries.

A third aspect of Livingston's outreach ministry is the evangelism that takes place through Bethlehem's small groups. As noted previously, he oversees all the adult discipleship ministries at Bethlehem, especially the cell-group ministry. He encourages the shepherds to be active in outreach and he encourages members to be active in seeking out the lost and bearing witness to Christ.¹⁴⁷ It is through these smaller settings that additional

¹⁴⁴BBC, "2001 Annual Report," 9.

¹⁴⁵Livingston, telephone interview, 6 November 2002.

¹⁴⁶BBC, "2001 Annual Report," 9.

¹⁴⁷Livingston, telephone interview, 6 November 2002.

outreach opportunities are planned and executed. Piper notes that members will not only invite unsaved friends to their small group meetings, they will plan small outreach events. Individuals or groups will plan small occasions like Christmas tea parties, service projects, retreats or trips through which they will share the gospel with neighbors and friends.¹⁴⁸

In conjunction with the E1 evangelism efforts listed above, Kenny Stokes conducts and involves the church in numerous E2 ministries to reach the large numbers of immigrants and African-Americans in the neighborhoods surrounding the church. One category of ministry that the church is becoming more active in is social crisis ministries. Bethlehem has its own Sanctity of Life Task Force that mobilizes the church for a variety of anti-abortion projects as well as garnering assistance for crisis pregnancy centers. In 2001, they even hosted and conducted a seminar for members and for the community called "Pro-Life 101" to "equip attendees to think clearly and converse persuasively about issues related to the value of human life."¹⁴⁹ Bethlehem has also developed two funds, the LYDIA fund and the MICAH fund, to help families with adoption. Since its inception, the MICAH fund has helped 195 African-American children to be adopted into Christian homes (23 in the year 2001). In 2001, the LYDIA fund assisted in placement of 11 institutionalized overseas orphans into Christian homes.¹⁵⁰ Other crisis ministries include the new efforts Bethlehem is considering in local homeless shelters, outreaches to those struggling with homosexuality, programs to help the unemployed find jobs,

¹⁴⁸Piper, telephone interview, 22 October 2002.

¹⁴⁹BBC, "2001 Annual Report," 21.

¹⁵⁰Ibid. Just about five years ago, Piper and his wife adopted an African American child. Piper has openly stated that the adoption of Talitha Ruth is a blessing God has used in his life in many ways. One of the most notable results of the adoption is the way God has made him get serious about racial harmony.

ministries to those recently released from prison, and evangelistic services at the county jails.¹⁵¹

A second category of ministry Bethlehem conducts is servant evangelism ministries. The Elliot Twins are two low income apartment high rises close to the church. BBC has a team of people who serve coffee for the residents every Monday morning to build friendships and to share the gospel. They also have some members who shuttle residents to the grocery store every Saturday morning as well as transporting people to church services.¹⁵² Bethlehem conducts a ministry called Nehemiah's Day in May of each year to build friendships and give practical assistance with various projects for those who live in the neighborhoods. BBC also holds other special events and services to share the gospel in the surrounding community. In 2000, they hosted a Christmas dinner during Advent for visitors in which the children's choir sang and Stokes provided a devotion on the gospel.¹⁵³

A third category through which Bethlehem reaches out is its community involvement ministries. Through civic involvement and community presence, BBC members seek to live as lights for Christ among the very people they seek to win. One of their most unique ministries is what they call "Urban Dwellers." These are people who have moved back into the neighborhoods surrounding Bethlehem specifically to live and work among the people they are trying to reach for the gospel. Both the 2000 and 2001

¹⁵¹BBC, "2000 Annual Report," 22-23.

¹⁵²BBC, "2001 Annual Report," 20-21.

¹⁵³BBC, "2000 Annual Report," 22.

BBC annual reports mention that urban dwellers number in the hundreds.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, Piper requires all of his staff to live in the neighborhoods surrounding Bethlehem, as he does himself. The move of urban dwellers into the community has taken place over several years and it has often been the subject of sermons. In a 1995 sermon on the mission and vision of BBC, Piper stated the following:

Ever since I came to Bethlehem in 1980 and moved to be a part of the church's neighborhood we have said that "proximity implies accountability." The church's gathering here means something. Within a short time we called a full time associate for urban ministry. Dozens of families have moved into the city as part of the challenge to come make a difference in the city. Ministries of all kinds have sprung up over the years. And we have clearly put a priority on urban ministry. This is where we come and meet and proximity implies some accountability. . . .

Test your motives. Why do you live where you live? How did you make that choice? Did you buy on the outer ring in the hope of fast appreciation? Did you buy in the city in hopes of catching the front end of regentrification? Not the best of motives, either one. It is possible to move to the city for wrong reasons, and to move to the suburbs for the wrong reasons – fear, apathy, pride, greed, inordinate love of things, etc. *Why* do you live where you live, that is the question.

I need to clarify the meaning of what you will hear in the years to come, lest you take it wrongly. The choice to live in the suburbs is the easier choice. It's the one that most people take, if they can afford it – black or white or Asian. If you can afford it, you leave. That's the natural thing to do. I don't know of any church that has developed a program to help their urban people be willing to move to the suburbs. Such programs are not necessary. Almost all the natural gravity pulls in that direction. There never has been a white flight – or any other colored flight – from the suburbs to the center of the city. Downward mobility is un-American.

Therefore, I take it as part of my calling in this church to so preach and to so live as to persuade some Christians to move to the city to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things. Not because I think it is wrong to live in the suburbs, but because it is most definitely right – and gloriously right – to live for Christ and his kingdom in the city, and almost nothing in our materialistic, security-driven, fun-seeking culture is going to motivate you to consider it. In short the church doesn't need as much help to spread itself as salt through the suburbs as it does to spread itself as salt through the decaying inner city.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴BBC, "2000 Annual Report," 21. BBC, "2001 Annual Report," 20.

¹⁵⁵John Piper, "The Mission and Vision of Bethlehem Baptist Church: Volume Nine," a sermon delivered 26 November 1995 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 26 September 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/95/112695.html>; Internet. As this concept of "proximity implies accountability" took root

This ministry has continued to reap results, even as one member of Bethlehem was killed in an act of urban violence.

Tim White was one of many young men and families who heeded the call to minister in the inner city. In December of 1988, he moved to the Powderhorn Neighborhood and began working in one of Bethlehem's programs for children. He and his room mate developed a ministry with kids that had previously been in trouble with the law. After dropping off some friends late one Sunday evening in August of 1989, he decided to take a walk in Powderhorn Park, perhaps to exercise the knee he had just had surgery on a few months before. His body was found on Monday morning by some boys who were fishing in Powderhorn Lake. He had been severely beaten, robbed, and dumped into the lake; due to the severe violence done to his head and neck, he drowned. Even today, he is viewed by the members of Bethlehem as an inspirational martyr for the cause of Christ in the inner city.¹⁵⁶

Aside from urban dwellers, there are numerous other components of Bethlehem's community involvement ministries. In addition to living in the community, many BBC members choose to work at a variety of secular vocations in South Minneapolis in an effort to reach people with the gospel. Members also get involved in an assortment of community activities to facilitate interaction with those in their mission field. Bethlehem hosts and leads a Boy Scout/Cub Scout Troop; they conduct several backyard

at Bethlehem, Piper emphasized it so strongly that he actually had to go back and help many members deal with the guilt that they were feeling for not living in the urban context of the church.

¹⁵⁶Justin Taylor, "Tim White & Bethlehem Martyrdom," internal, unpublished flyer created for the membership of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, 1 November 1999.

Bible clubs each summer in the community; members get involved in coaching through the Minneapolis Park Board, Urban Ventures, and the Elliot Park and Recreation Center to be able to interact and share the gospel with children. As noted earlier, the women's ministry works through Adventure Girl's Bible Club to mentor fifth and sixth grade girls with the hopes of leading them to Christ. Bethlehem also helped start Hope Academy, an urban Christian School now in its third year.¹⁵⁷ Stokes has noted, "Every time I visit Hope Academy I have the impression that this ministry might well have the most strategic impact on our urban neighbors and neighborhoods for many years to come."¹⁵⁸

The fourth and final category of E2 evangelism carried on by Bethlehem is specialized ethnic ministry. In response to some of Piper's recent sermons on racial issues, BBC has formed its own Racial Harmony Task Force. New efforts are being made by this group to diversify the ethnic make-up of the church. A gospel choir called "Every Tribe and Tongue" has become active in Sunday morning worship, the Elders are taking steps to attract more African-Americans to leadership and staff positions, and BBC is networking with more African-American pastors who share their calvinistic views. BBC likewise has a strong refugee ministry, primarily to the Somalis. They have a Refugee Ministry Team that coordinates the collection of household items and clothes, mentoring and tutoring for refugee youths, and cooperative efforts with other agencies to reach the Somali population with the gospel. BBC has also partnered with Jews for Jesus and their evangelistic efforts in Minneapolis, as well as partnering with new ministries to native Americans.¹⁵⁹ They are

¹⁵⁷BBC, "2001 Annual Report," 21.

¹⁵⁸Ibid.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 21-22.

truly doing everything possible to minister to the people groups that exist within their immediate context.

In all the different aspects of E1 and E2 evangelism at Bethlehem, an amazing passion for the lost is repeatedly demonstrated. Large numbers of Bethlehem members are heeding the call of God and making earthly sacrifices as they seek the joy of making God's glory known among the peoples of Minneapolis. Even martyrdom has not deterred them from seeking to be lights in the dark places of the city. The staff, leadership, and laity of Bethlehem truly embody the theological tenet of the glorifying witness of the church. Furthermore, in their witnessing, the truths represented by "Quest for Joy" form the basis of their call to repent, receive, and rely on Christ in whom there is eternal joy and satisfaction. Thus, in accordance with the material presented in the previous section, the thesis is proved. The four theological tenets drive and define the local evangelism efforts of Bethlehem Baptist Church.

Global Outreach and *Panta ta Ethne*

The objective of this section is to once again prove the thesis of this dissertation in regards to the global outreach ministries of Bethlehem Baptist Church. As is hopefully apparent by this point in the work, BBC has an incredible proclivity toward missions that is founded in the biblical doctrine of the glory of God and His purpose in creation. It is their theology that motivates them so strongly to carry the gospel unto the nations, and this part of the chapter will now delineate the nature of their E3 ministry.

As noted in the chapter on Piper's theological development, the awakening to world missions took place at Bethlehem in 1983. Since that time, there have basically been three men who have led the missions ministry at Bethlehem along side of the Foreign

Missions Committee: Tom Steller, Kurt Swanson, and Eric Hyatt. Steller has played the key role, along with Piper, in renewing BBC's proud missionary heritage. One of the heroes in Bethlehem's history is a young Swedish man that literally was used by God to reach an entire people group. Ola Hanson, missionary to the Kachin people of upper Burma, was commissioned and ordained by the first Swedish Baptist Church in 1890. He translated the Bible into Kachin and led many to faith in Christ. There are now almost 500,000 Kachin Christians, and Hanson is revered even today as the father of the Kachin church.¹⁶⁰ The people of Bethlehem cherish this missionary history and are seeking to have even greater impact around the world.

Though not as multi-faceted as the urban ministry, Bethlehem's foreign missions ministry is no less passionate. Since the awakening to missions in 1983, Piper has often issued the call and led the charge for world missions, and many have responded. Bethlehem currently has in excess of seventy full-time missionaries on the foreign mission field. They are serving on almost every continent; from East Asia to Europe, and from Africa to South America. They even have several missionaries in closed countries, risking persecution and martyrdom to carry the gospel light to the nations.¹⁶¹

As the missions ministry is treated in this section, it is first important to set forth the particular nature of missions that Piper has set before the people of Bethlehem. This missions perspective is based upon the Greek New Testament phrase *Panta ta Ethne*. In the fifth chapter of *Let the Nations Be Glad*, Piper asks the question, "Should the churches

¹⁶⁰"The Ola Hanson Story" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/olahanson.htm>; Internet.

¹⁶¹"Foreign Missions Staff" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/index.htm>; Internet.

seek people groups currently beyond the gospel or should it seek to win as many people as possible before the end?" Piper's contention is that churches and missionaries should seek to reach people groups currently beyond the gospel.¹⁶² If missions is defined as reaching as many individuals as possible with the gospel, then it is not a completable task. If, however, missions is defined as planting churches among all the peoples of the earth so that indigenous churches can win and disciple consecutive generations of Christians, then missions is a completable task.¹⁶³

This perspective flows from Piper's interpretation of the phrase *Panta ta Ethne* as a reference to people groups. In Matthew 28:19, when Jesus commissions his followers to make disciples "of all nations," He is sending them to all the people groups of the world, not just the receptive nations and not just the geographic nations. To define people groups, Piper refers back to the "milestone definition" set forth by the Lausanne Strategy Working Group in 1982. It defines a people group as

a significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc. or combinations of these. . . . [It is] the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.¹⁶⁴

Thus, while "Timothy" missionaries are certainly important to world evangelization, the pressing cry of the gospel is for the church to send forth more and more "Paul" missionaries who will press onward to unreached peoples and plant indigenous churches.

¹⁶²Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!*, 169-70.

¹⁶³Piper, telephone interview by author, 2 October 2000.

¹⁶⁴Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!*, 171. Piper is here quoting an article by Ralph Winter, "Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept," *Mission Frontiers* (August/September 1989): 18.

Piper states,

God's will for missions is that every people group be reached with the testimony of Christ and that a people be called out for his name from all the nations. It may be that this definition of missions will in fact result in the greatest number of white-hot worshipers for God's Son. But that remains for God to decide. Our responsibility is to define missions his way and then obey.¹⁶⁵

As a result of this perspective, Bethlehem's missions ministry is driven by the desire to send missionaries to people groups not currently being reached through global missionary efforts. It is one of the reason why Bethlehem adopted its own unreached people group in the late 1980s. As noted earlier in the section on prayer, BBC adopted the Maninka, the second largest people group in Guinea, West Africa. As a result of their passionate prayer for this group and their fervent desire to make the gospel known where it is not, there are now four missionary couples from Bethlehem sharing the gospel among the Maninka.¹⁶⁶

Given Bethlehem's basic missionary strategy, this section will now turn to describing the church's missions ministry. BBC's missions ministry is composed mainly of three key aspects: training, exposure, and sending. Elements of missionary training are present in a variety of the ministries at Bethlehem. Piper's sermons, the church's small group studies, the cross-cultural urban ministries, and a plethora of other programs all serve as missionary teaching and training grounds for those who are headed for the foreign field. Piper consistently prepares his people to respond to the call to the mission field through his own ministry and through the teaching and encouraging of other great missions spokesmen at their annual missions focus. However, the main training program

¹⁶⁵Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 170.

¹⁶⁶"Foreign Missions" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/index.htm>; Internet.

for missionaries at Bethlehem is the Missionary Nurture Program.

The opening paragraph of the document describing the Missionary Nurture Program states,

At Bethlehem Baptist Church we realize that it is the church's responsibility to recruit and equip some of our best people in order to send them out as missionaries. We want to do what we can as a local church to equip them to communicate the love and justice of Christ in cultures where there is no indigenous evangelizing church yet planted or where the indigenous church does not yet have sufficient resources and personnel to evangelize their people in an effective way.¹⁶⁷

This program then stresses five dimensions of preparation. Dimension one is "A Growing Maturity – Spiritually, Emotionally, and Relationally," and it emphasizes personal spiritual growth through Bible study, memorization, and prayer. The action points for this first dimension also include completion of some personality and marital inventories which, coupled with some pastoral counseling, assess the preparedness of the candidate and his family.¹⁶⁸

The second dimension, "A Growing Commitment to the Life and Ministry of the Local Church," stresses regular involvement in worship, small groups, and ministry at Bethlehem. In particular, candidates are called to seek, "regular involvement in a ministry designed to build redemptive bridges with unbelievers."¹⁶⁹ The third dimension is, "A Growing Knowledge of God's Word." The five action points for this dimension are the five courses of study in TBI Track One. Thus, students are expected to complete either Track One or Track Two of The Bethlehem Institute so that they are fully founded in the

¹⁶⁷"Nurture Program" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/nurture.htm>; Internet.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

Scriptures and well versed in Bethlehem's particular theology.¹⁷⁰

Dimension four, "A Growing Application of God's Word through Ministry," emphasizes involvement in and leadership of ministries to develop some of the skills that the candidate will be exercising on the foreign field. Finally, "A Growing Relationship with the Senders" is the fifth dimension. It encourages the candidates to be faithful in building relationships with those who will be supporting them through prayers, supplies, and finances while on the field.

The second aspect of Bethlehem's missions ministry is exposure. BBC seeks to develop a passion for the foreign field in its members by exposing them to short-term endeavors. Swanson noted in his annual report that in 2001, 132 people were sent off for anywhere from one week to three months to the foreign field. Countries visited included Kenya, Guinea, Haiti, Bolivia, Cameroon, Ecuador, Mauritania, Guatemala, Zimbabwe, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the Philippines. The visits serve the dual purpose of ministering to Bethlehem's career missionaries who are permanently on the field as well as educating and motivating the short-term missionaries.¹⁷¹

Those who want to participate in short-term endeavors are likewise required to be actively involved in the life of the church, proven in their character and spiritual depth, and possessed of a level of experience and maturity sufficient for the proposed assignment. They are further encouraged to be involved in the Missionary Nurture Program and actively participating in TBI classes. The Foreign Missions Committee grants financial support to short-termers based upon a variety of factors including trip length, individual

¹⁷⁰Ibid.

¹⁷¹BBC, "2001 Annual Report," 15.

financial resources, and level of church involvement. Support does not exceed twenty-five percent.¹⁷²

The third aspect of Bethlehem's missions ministry is sending. As noted above, the church has a large number of missionaries on the field all around the world, and having a global presence for the glory of God is the ultimate goal of the ministries of BBC. To that end, the church has drafted a policy statement for their sending ministry. The Career Missions Policy notes that Bethlehem sends missionaries to primarily three types of foreign outreach:

1. Church Planting: the establishing of local, indigenous churches characterized by true worship of God, effective biblical nurture of believers, and evangelization of unbelievers, to the end that these churches will reproduce themselves.
2. Strengthening existing churches: equipping and building up existing local, indigenous churches so that they are able to evangelize and reproduce churches among their own people in an effective way.
3. Support ministries: providing support services to aid those engaged in church planting and equipping ministries.¹⁷³

Regarding these three categories, the policies note,

These categories are not meant to convey inferiority or superiority among types of missionary work. We trust that under the Holy Spirit's direction, a healthy blend of diversified ministries will be supported and encouraged. At the same time, we will seek to plan and strategize so as to focus on areas of missionary activity which seem to be critical from the perspective of world missions at this time in history. For this reason, we will increasingly seek to devote the majority of Bethlehem's supported missionary activity to the planting and equipping of churches in both "unreached" and critically needy areas.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷²"Short Term Missions Policy" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/shortterm.htm>; Internet.

¹⁷³"Career Missions Policy" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/careermissions.htm>; Internet.

¹⁷⁴Ibid.

Thus, Bethlehem maintains a focus on unreached peoples while still recognizing the important role of Timothy missions and support services.

There are a number of qualifications that career missionaries must meet to be sent and supported by Bethlehem. They must have been actively involved in ministry at Bethlehem for at least two years; they must complete the Missionary Nurture Program; they must have cross-cultural experience either through short-term mission trips or ministry in an E2 context in the U.S.; their proposed missionary activity must align with the Foreign Missions Committee's missions strategy and emphasis; and they must maintain relationships with Bethlehem members and leaders, abiding by guidelines for correspondence and periodic reviews of ministry.¹⁷⁵

Additionally, missionary candidates must be appointed by an approved missions agency. Bethlehem views their partnerships with these agencies as critical for oversight and accountability on the field, and for mobilization of resource personnel and finances. The Foreign Missions Committee contends, "[We are] convinced that missionaries are more effective in ministry and more adequately cared for when working under an established sending agency; therefore, it is our policy not to support missionaries who are independent of such sponsorship and direction."¹⁷⁶ Thus, if the agency's overall goals and doctrinal statement are consistent with Bethlehem's, the church enters into a partnership where they become accountable to provide the best-equipped and most biblically trained candidates. The agencies are likewise accountable in the manner in which they utilize

¹⁷⁵Ibid.

¹⁷⁶Ibid.

resources that emanate from the church.¹⁷⁷

The Baptist General Convention does not have a Cooperative Program which supports missionaries, so each candidate is responsible for raising his or her own support. Based upon the intended work, missions agency appointment, and completion of all the requirements of the Missionary Nurture Program, missionary candidates can receive up to twenty-five percent of their anticipated needs from Bethlehem Baptist Church. If supported by the church, missionaries are expected to maintain consistent communication with the church and they must inform the church of any changes in ministry plans or in sending agencies.¹⁷⁸

In return, missionary candidates receive loving support at Bethlehem through missionary support teams. A support team “is a small group (6-12) of committed people who come together to care for their missionary in a variety of ways, striving to meet their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. It is a group of people with whom the missionary can be open and honest, allowing them to see his needs, and share his successes and defeats.”¹⁷⁹ The missionary selects his own team from within the church. It is typically composed of people with whom he has formed close relationships. The Foreign Missions Committee has explained why it requires support teams:

Missionaries don't go out for adventure, they don't go out for material profit, they don't go out for prestige, nor do they go out merely for humanitarian purposes, they do go out for the sake of the Name. We want the missionaries that we financially support to deeply feel that they are genuinely cared for, that they are more than just names on the back of our worship folders, or that they are more than just

¹⁷⁷Ibid.

¹⁷⁸Ibid.

¹⁷⁹“Missionary Support Teams” [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/missionarysupport.htm>; Internet.

line items in our budget. Bethlehem doesn't just want to "have" missionaries, but we want to "send" missionaries in a manner worthy of the Name.¹⁸⁰

Thus, not only does Bethlehem have a well-developed training and sending ministry for missionaries, it also has a solid support ministry whereby missionaries are covered in prayer, supported by loving friendships, and cared for in practical ways.

As this section draws to a close, attention must return once again to the thesis of the dissertation. In the examination of the local and global outreach ministries of Bethlehem Baptist Church, has it been shown that the four theological tenets define and drive the church's evangelistic endeavors? In answering that question, it must first be noted that the character and breadth of Bethlehem's outreach ministries reflects the glorifying witness of the church. The people of Bethlehem have obviously embraced the theology set forth by Piper, and they are therefore making life-changing decisions to sacrifice the things of the world with a view to making God's glory known in the city and around the globe. Second, as the previous section proved, Bethlehem's theological and practical training for evangelism is defined and driven by the four theological tenets. Thus, whether members are preparing to go door-to-door at local universities, learning to share the gospel at an urban coffee house, or training to plant a church in West Africa, the manner and content of the gospel they share is firmly rooted in Piper's theology of Christian Hedonism.

As final proof for the thesis in this section, it is worth reflecting again upon the article prepared by John Piper and Tom Steller in 1996. In "Driving Convictions Behind World Missions at Bethlehem," they listed fourteen propositions that define their missionary endeavors. They are as follows:

¹⁸⁰Ibid.

- 1) God's goal in creation and redemption is a missionary goal because our God is a missionary God.
- 2) God is passionately committed to his fame. God's ultimate goal is that his name be known and praised by all the peoples of the earth.
- 3) Worship is the fuel and goal of missions.
- 4) God's passion to be known and praised by all the peoples of the earth is not selfish, but loving.
- 5) God's purpose to be praised among all the nations cannot fail. It is an absolutely certain promise. It is going to happen.
- 6) Only in God will our souls be at rest.
- 7) Domestic ministries are the goal of frontier missions.
- 8) The missionary task is focused on *peoples*, not just individual people, and is therefore finishable.
- 9) The need of the hour is for thousands of new Paul-type missionaries – a fact which is sometimes obscured by the quantity of Timothy-type missionaries.
- 10) It is the joyful duty and the awesome privilege of every local church to send out missionaries "in a manner worthy of God" (3 John 6).
- 11) We are called to a wartime lifestyle for the sake of going and sending.
- 12) Prayer is a wartime walkie-talkie, not a domestic intercom.
- 13) Our aim is not to persuade everyone to become a missionary, but to help everyone become a World Christian.
- 14) God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him; and our satisfaction in him is greatest when it expands to embrace others – even when this involves suffering.¹⁸¹

In reading the list of fourteen convictions, it is obvious that they are practical expressions of the four theological tenets given in the thesis. This list stands as final confirmation that

¹⁸¹John Piper and Tom Steller, "Driving Convictions Behind World Missions at Bethlehem (1996)," a sermon delivered 3 November 1996 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/drivingconvictions.htm>; Internet.

the E1, E2, and E3 evangelistic ministries of Bethlehem Baptist Church are defined and driven by the sovereignty and supremacy of God, the depraved affections of man, conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist, and the glorifying witness of the church.

DGM/Writing Ministry

In the final section of this chapter, one last aspect of Piper's evangelistic ministry must be treated. Within the past decade, Piper's writings have grown more and more popular. His reformed theology and his philosophy of Christian Hedonism are gaining wider appeal in American evangelicalism and around the world. Piper stated in one interview that he feels God is truly using his preaching and writing ministry to awaken other pastors and Christians to the glory of God. Thus, he invests much of his time and effort in these two ministries.¹⁸²

The organization largely responsible for circulating Piper's materials is Desiring God Ministries (DGM). DGM has played a tremendous role in fulfilling Bethlehem's mission far beyond the city limits of Minneapolis. In 1994, BBC's tape ministry, sermon manuscript/article service, the Bethlehem Bookstore, and the Christian Hedonism Expansion Fund were all merged together to form Desiring God Ministries.¹⁸³ This resource arm would oversee the distribution of all of Piper's publications, articles, and sermons, direct the annual Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, develop and maintain the

¹⁸²Piper, telephone interview with author, 8 October 2002.

¹⁸³"Annual Report: 1994" (Minneapolis: Bethlehem Baptist Church, January 1995, photocopied), 32. The Christian Hedonism Expansion Fund had begun in March of 1986 as a "strategy for spreading the vision of God portrayed in Christian Hedonism" (32).

Desiring God website, and coordinate all of Piper's outside speaking engagements. By 2000, this ministry had grown significantly, employing thirteen staff members, distributing 110,000 resource items in over a hundred countries, receiving over \$143,000 in royalties from domestic and international sales of Piper's books, hosting over 900 pastors at the annual Bethlehem Conference, and coordinating 14 outside speaking engagements for Piper at international conferences, universities, and seminaries.¹⁸⁴

DGM grew even larger the following year. As of the end of 2001, they had hired two additional staff members to handle the record number of book orders and sales they were experiencing. Jeff Anderson, the Executive Director for DGM noted in his 2001 annual report,

We are encouraged to see the hunger in the world for the Word of God! People are combing the DGM Website for inspiration and truth. When they log on, they see and hear material that directs their attention to the supremacy of GOD in all things. John Piper saw three books published this year and is working towards the goal, Lord willing, of seeing four new books published in 2002. Book sales are soaring, and more of John Piper's books are being published in foreign languages. We ministered this year to people in well over 100 countries. We are now looking at 2002 and the possibility of offering the Piper sermons on radio. In 2002, DGM will have to seek God for a new home, as we are growing out of our current space.¹⁸⁵

With the growing importance of the website, DGM has stated that their vision for desiringGod.org is,

TO spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ, BY multiplying the preaching and teaching ministry of John Piper through resource distribution, using the World Wide Web, IN ORDER to see as many people as possible embrace the reality that "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21), BECAUSE God is most glorified in us

¹⁸⁴"2000 Annual Report," 35-36.

¹⁸⁵BBC, "2001 Annual Report," 31.

when we are most satisfied in him.¹⁸⁶

This vision is definitely being realized. As the above quotes indicate, Piper's unique theology is growing in international prominence. Further, his particular theology of evangelism is also becoming more widely known, especially in the international context.

DGM has stated recently that they are praying for a language translation explosion to take place. Piper's works have already been translated into Bulgarian, Chinese, Dutch, French, Indonesian, Italian, Kachin, Korean, Portugese, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, and Spanish, and translation inquiries continue to come in. The most frequently translated works are *Desiring God*, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, and *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*. The "Quest for Joy" tract has also been translated into Russian and Spanish with more translations pending.¹⁸⁷

Given that one of Piper's most translated texts is *Let the Nations Be Glad* and the fact that "Quest for Joy" is being requested around the globe, it follows that Piper's particular theology of evangelism, set forth in the third chapter of this work, is in some way shaping international ministry efforts. Though the effect that Piper's writings are having upon world evangelicalism cannot be definitively measured, the level of impact could be significant. As noted in the second chapter, he has already been able to affect the course of his entire denomination. Thus, the potential impact of his God-centered, hedonistic theology upon global evangelism efforts is worth considering. All of these

¹⁸⁶"Welcome to DGM's Revised and Improved Website!" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/who_is_dgm/vision/welcome.html; Internet. All caps are as they appear on the web site.

¹⁸⁷"Translations of Books by John Piper" [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/library/translations/translation_info.html; Internet.

factors taken together demonstrate that Piper's theology of evangelism is reaching outside the context of a single congregation and affecting outreach efforts all over the globe.

A second critical aspect of Piper's writing ministry must also be treated before this chapter concludes. In 2001, Piper published two smaller works intended to reach more people with the doctrines and perspectives of Christian Hedonism. The first was *The Dangerous Duty of Delight: The Glorified God and the Satisfied Soul*.¹⁸⁸ This small, 84 page book is basically a condensed version of *Desiring God* in which Piper issues the call for Christians to convert to Christian Hedonism and find true happiness and joy in God. The second book was entitled *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*,¹⁸⁹ and it is another text steeped in Christian Hedonism yet focused upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. The most important characteristic of this book is that it is the only book to date that Piper has written with a specific evangelistic intention. Speaking of this book in his 2000 annual report, he said, "O how I pray God will spread a passion for the glories of Jesus through this book. It is one that I think you could give to a thoughtful unbeliever to introduce him or her to the Jesus you love and worship."¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, the text concludes with the entire text of "Quest for Joy," thereby inviting the reader to respond to the truth of the text by expressing saving faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁹¹

To date, this author is not aware of any conversions that have come about as a

¹⁸⁸John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight: The Glorified God and the Satisfied Soul* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001).

¹⁸⁹John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001).

¹⁹⁰BBC, "2000 Annual Report," 3.

¹⁹¹Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*, 124-27.

result of the book. Evangelistic results, however, are not the concern of this work; the focus is Piper's theology of evangelism. *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* is mentioned here because it is the one overt example of how Piper has used his writings not only to communicate his theology and views, but also to lead people to repentant faith in Jesus Christ. Yet it must be conceded that the gospel is presented in some form in almost all of Piper's books. He has the unique ability to set before the reader the full resplendency of God in all His glorious wonder. He then beckons all who behold God's grandeur to abandon every inkling of self and seek after the eternal joy and satisfaction found only through Christ.

Therefore, whether it is an intentionally evangelistic text like *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*, or a theological text like *The Pleasures of God*, Piper's writings reflect an impassioned desire for men to know God in a deep, abiding, heart-transforming manner. The invitation to repent, believe, and savor the excellencies of God is implied in every work, and the doctrinal basis of that invitation is his theology of evangelism. He calls people to first recognize the supremacy and authority of God over all of life. Then he challenges them to see themselves, in all their sinfulness, against the backdrop of God's perfect holiness, justice, and glory. The call is then issued for them to repent of sin and believe in Jesus Christ, the one who died for God's people and thus for God's glory. Finally, Piper challenges them to know God as their ultimate, all-sufficient Treasure and to spend their lives joyfully making His glory known to all the peoples of the earth. These truths embody and flow from the sovereignty and supremacy of God, the depraved affections of man, conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist, and the glorifying witness of the church. As Piper sets forth profound theological concepts for the shaping and edifying of the saints, he communicates a message that is inherently evangelistic.

Given this final discussion, the thesis has now been proved for all five elements of Piper's evangelistic ministry. In his own sermons and writings, and in Bethlehem's prayer efforts, discipleship programs, and outreach endeavors, the theological tenets expressed above do indeed define and drive the evangelistic aspects of Piper's ministry.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Evidence

This work began with the clear objective of proving the following thesis: “In addition to his basic conservative, evangelical presuppositions, there are four theological tenets that drive the evangelistic ministry of John Piper: the sovereignty and supremacy of God, the depraved affections of man, conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist, and the glorifying witness of the church.” That objective has been reached.

After setting forth Piper’s biographical information and recounting his theological development, the third chapter delineated the four tenets stated above. The sovereignty and supremacy of God is the cornerstone of Piper’s theological views. God’s goal and pursuit in creation is His glory. His sovereignty (His infinite power and ability to do as He pleases) insures His supremacy (the fact that He is foremost in His own affections and thus rules the universe to achieve the greatest display of His glory). Man, although created by God to reflect and fill the earth with His glory, is sinful by nature and by choice. As a result, his affections are set wholly upon the things of the world and the selfish pursuit of his own glory. Apart from a regenerating work of God, he has no natural inclination or ability to honor his Creator – he is totally depraved. Therefore, even the moral good he may accomplish is sin because it does not proceed from faith.

God acts for His glory, however, by regenerating man – instilling in his heart a taste for the glory of God and the beauty of Christ. God’s miracle of new birth thus leads to conversion and salvation. Saving faith, however, is not just the conviction that Christ is a reliable Savior. True saving faith sees Christ as the desirable Treasure and makes the pursuit of joy in Him life’s ultimate goal. Thus, conversion is the creation of a Christian Hedonist. Christian Hedonists pursue the multiplication of their joy by loving others and likewise leading them to the wellspring of eternal joy which is Jesus Christ. Their missionary passion even enables them to embrace persecutions and sufferings because they receive the blessing of displaying God’s ultimate worth to the world.

The fourth chapter then examined five aspects of Piper’s evangelistic ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church. The first section demonstrated that the theological tenets set forth in the third chapter were amply present in Piper’s preaching ministry. When addressing evangelism and missions, Piper grounds his sermons in the sovereignty and supremacy of God. He stresses God’s sovereignty in electing and regenerating man for His own glorious purposes. He further notes that without God’s initiating work, man would remain in his hopelessly sinful estate, spending himself for his own glory. As man experiences the salvation wrought by God, he is awakened to the joyful delight that is God Himself and subsequently desires to expand that joy by loving and leading others to Christ. Finally, Piper preaches that as Christians undertake their mission of joy, God’s fame is spread, Christ is glorified, the goal of worship is fulfilled, and the world is made to behold the ultimate worth of God.

The second section of chapter four examined the various prayer ministries of the church. Ample testimony was presented from the staff of Bethlehem to affirm the fact

that prayer was critical in their evangelistic efforts. Four facts in particular proved the thesis for this section. First, prayer is by nature an expression of dependence upon God and an acknowledgment of His sovereignty over all creation. This fact, together with the truth that the congregation prays specifically for God to manifest His glory, affirms their espousal of the foundational truth that God is sovereign and supreme. Second, the people of BBC pray for the softening and salvation of men – by name, by people group, and in general. In so doing, they are recognizing man's hardness of heart apart from God's regenerating work, his inability to save himself, and the need for God to overcome man's naturally sinful state. Third, the members of BBC pray that as people come to faith, they would savor the beauty of God, treasure Him above all else, and press hard after the joy that is to be found only in Him; they pray for them to be true Christians and therefore true Christian Hedonists. Finally, Piper and his people pray for God to do His work through them. They pray for favor among the lost, for opportunities to share, and for more missionaries and evangelists to be raised up for the harvest.

The third section of the fourth chapter addressed Bethlehem's training and discipleship ministries. This section pointed out that the main component of BBC's discipling ministries, The Bethlehem Institute, has as its goal the development of "world Christians." This goal is accomplished through the "Perspective on the World Christian Movement" curriculum, as well as through the curriculum developed by Piper and his staff that is based upon his particular theological perspectives. Even more significant is the fact that Bethlehem offers only one evangelism training class, and the material for that class centers around the gospel tract, "Quest for Joy," written by Piper. By systematically examining each component of the tract, it was demonstrated that the tract was founded

upon the first three theological tenets stated in the thesis. Bethlehem's obvious dedication to training missionaries, ministers, and evangelistically-minded lay-leaders sufficiently exhibited the fourth tenet. Thus, it was proven that the four theological tenets do indeed define and drive the evangelistic training ministries of Bethlehem Baptist.

The fourth section turned to the subject of Bethlehem's local and global outreach ministries. As the church's E1, E2, and E3 ministries were described, several important factors became evident. First, the training ground for each type of evangelistic ministry was The Bethlehem Institute. The previous section had already established that Bethlehem's evangelism training curriculum was firmly founded upon and driven by the four theological tenets. Thus, those doing evangelism at Bethlehem are trained to proclaim the gospel in a manner based upon the theology Piper has instilled in the church. Secondly, the people not only proclaim it, they live it. They decide where to live, where to work, and where to serve based upon God's leadership and His sovereign purposes for redeeming mankind. Finally, BBC's own ministry statements openly declare the theological convictions driving their evangelistic ministries.¹ These statements readily verify the thesis that Bethlehem's outreach ministries are founded in and flow from the four theological tenets set forth in this work.

In the fifth and final section of chapter four, Piper's writing ministry was briefly examined. The fact that so many of his materials and works are being translated and requested around the world testifies to the prominence his particular theology is gaining and the fact that he is in some manner affecting the cause of world evangelization outside

¹John Piper and Tom Steller, "Driving Convictions Behind World Missions at Bethlehem (1996)," a sermon delivered 3 November 1996 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.bbcmpls.org/foreignmissions/drivingconvictions.htm>; Internet.

the Bethlehem Baptist context. More importantly, this section noted that the four theological tenets are foundational to many of the perspectives presented in Piper's writings. Thus, though most of his works are not intentionally evangelistic, they inherently communicate the gospel.

The thesis of this dissertation has therefore been proved. The sovereignty and supremacy of God, the depraved affections of man, conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist, and the glorifying witness of the church are the four theological tenets that define and drive the evangelistic ministries of Bethlehem Baptist Church. By having his ministries based solidly upon scriptural truth and centered around the glory of God, Piper avoids the man-centered pitfalls of pragmatism while at the same time calling for evangelistic fervency in the church. He recognizes that it is ultimately the greatness, glory, and sovereignty of the global God that awakens Christians from temporal distractions and focuses them upon the joyful pursuit of the Treasure that is Christ.

Author's Assessment

In the introductory chapter, it was stated that the intent of this work was not to extensively critique or evaluate Piper's theology of evangelism or his particular evangelistic methodology. Thus, the focus throughout this work has simply been to prove the thesis. However, this author would be greatly amiss if he did not in some way assess the strengths and weaknesses of Piper's theological approach.

First, this work sufficiently shows that Piper is indeed a recovery theologian. He is a careful biblical exegete, he preaches expositively, his writings and sermons are saturated with Scripture, and all of his theological insights are focused upon and defined by the glory of God. As he has undertaken the subject of missions and evangelism, he has

done so with a primary concern for the truth, not results. He thus avoids pragmatism and its many pitfalls while at the same time restoring the theological foundations to the mission of the church. His own ministry begins with a firmly established theology that then results in a missionary fervency unmatched by most other evangelical churches.

Second, Piper's ministry and writings embody an evangelistic brand of Calvinism that is rare in evangelicalism. Calvin's theological views are being recovered in many seminaries and churches, yet there is still great resistance to his doctrinal views in evangelicalism as a whole. This resistance is primarily the result of three factors: 1) people are largely unaware of the scriptural evidence for this view because pastors have largely avoided preaching these doctrines; 2) the perceived, yet erroneous view that Calvinism is opposed to evangelism and missions; and 3) the prevalent, yet unscriptural opinion that man is master of his own fate and therefore has the right to determine his own eternal destination. Piper's perspective of Christian Hedonism is a vehicle for the recovery of Calvinism because it reasserts reformed theology and it rightly recovers the evangelistic imperatives that flow from reformed theology. Once again, Piper's ministry is an excellent working example of this fact. Bethlehem Baptist Church embodies an incredible missionary focus that evangelical churches need to recover.

Third, Piper's presentation of the gospel eliminates the dichotomy that is so often drawn between "man-centered" and "God-centered" evangelism. Will Metzger's text, *Tell the Truth*, is a prime example of this viewpoint.² The premise of his text is that modern gospel presentations focus around man and the benefits received from salvation rather than focusing upon God and His redemptive purposes. Piper shatters this

²Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel to the Whole Person by Whole People* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1984).

perspective in “Quest for Joy.” In this particular expression of the gospel, God’s ultimate glory, perfect purpose, justice, and grace are foundational, yet the appeal to repent and believe is based upon the offer of eternal joy and satisfaction that comes from knowing Christ as one’s Treasure. This view flows from Piper’s contention that man’s happiness is a valid pursuit when happiness is sought in God.

Fourth, Piper takes seriously the command to make disciples, not just converts. Throughout this research process, the critical role of discipleship was affirmed by Piper and his staff. Their goal is to develop a healthy, biblically adept, evangelistically fervent congregation. Thus, ministries are built upon solid theological foundations, and every member is called to serve according to their interests and giftedness. Piper is building a church founded upon God, not numbers. Furthermore, he must be applauded for making every effort to keep the focus on God and off himself. As he prepared his church to split and worship in two locations, he preached the following:

Planting a passion for God (a new, strong, God-centered church) would reduce the tendency to rely too heavily on one man’s preaching ministry. Christ, and no man, is the head of the church. He ordains the ministry of the Word as a means of his grace, and he anoints men for this great work. But he gives all the growth, and does not make his triumphs hang on any man. . . . The point I have just made raises the question: how dependent on me is this church? Is it possible that several hundred of you would be so in love with the vision of God and so confident in the mercy and power of God that planting a new church to spread this passion would be more precious and more important to you than hearing me preach every Sunday? If this same God were lifted up for your joy by another preacher in the context of deep, God-centered passionate worship supported by strong ministry to children and youth (that YOU would help make strong) would you be willing to take the risks to be a part of Planting a Passion for God? Oh, how healthy and good for us such ventures of faith are!³

³John Piper, “Planting a Passion for God: A Dream for Bethlehem in 2002,” a sermon delivered 13 January 2002 at Bethlehem Baptist Church [on-line]; accessed 1 November 2002; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/02/011302.html>; Internet.

Given the aforementioned strengths, the question likely in the mind of the reader is, “Are there any weaknesses?” This author’s reply is, “yes.” One question that surfaced concerns conversions: If Piper’s theology of evangelism is so remarkable and his ministry so healthy, why is there not more conversion growth? As noted in the previous chapter, Bethlehem’s “2000 by 2000” ministry project reported that 722 people came to saving faith in Jesus Christ through the various ministries of the church between 1990 and 2000.⁴ However, baptisms at Bethlehem during this same time period ranged only from twelve to thirty-nine per year. Analysis of the statistics provides a specific example: 231 of the 722 professions of faith came during 2000 alone, yet there were only 39 baptisms during this same year.⁵ The level of baptisms at Bethlehem is simply not proportional to the level of evangelistic activity and rhetoric.

When asked directly about Bethlehem’s lack of conversion growth, Piper gave a three-fold reply. First he stated that God is God and He is responsible for filling the nets. He gives fish in the net in His time and in His way. Awakenings, revivals, and large numbers of conversions are all God’s work, not man’s. Piper has no intention of making conversion man’s work, but he will continue to encourage his people to be willing fishermen.⁶ Second, he stated that he simply does not have the gift of evangelism

⁴Bethlehem Baptist Church, “2000 Annual Report,” Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, January 2001, 29. David Livingston, Associate for Cell Life and Adult Ministries, indicates in his portion of the report that of the 722 professions of faith from 1990 to 2000, 231 came during the year 2000 alone (17).

⁵Derived from the clerk’s report in each annual report from 1990 to 2000.

⁶John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, telephone interview by author, 8 October 2002, Minneapolis, notes.

(evangelist?) like his father. Evangelism is just not a strong area for him personally.⁷

Third, in answer to the above question, Piper does not sense that a focus on conversion growth is the priority calling of his ministry. He sees his primary responsibility as being a mobilizer for God-centeredness. Thus, he pours himself into proclaiming God's glory, writing, and encouraging other Christians and pastors to be God-centered. He further notes that when evangelism and numerical growth are the exclusive focuses of the church, the spiritual character of the body often lacks depth. He notes that it is this pragmatic focus that has brought much of evangelicalism to where it is: immature, shallow, and drifting toward liberalism because it is not biblically founded. Furthermore, quick conversion growth is often quick to die away. He does contend that if he wanted to, he could abandon his other pursuits to place more of a focus on evangelism – on winning mass, immediate conversions – but his preaching and writing ministries are where he feels God is using him the most. Growing evidence supports the fact that God is truly using his vision, his sermons, and his writings to awaken others to the glory of God. Thus, this ministry to evangelicalism is his main focus.⁸

Piper's reply to the question above does provide valuable insight into his thinking, but the question of conversion growth at Bethlehem still remains. This author agrees with Piper's contention that conversions are ultimately God's responsibility and not man's. This author likewise agrees that church health is a more serious concern than church size, and Bethlehem does focus on health by maintaining church membership expectations that go beyond mere attendance. According to the 2001 Annual Report,

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

average Sunday morning worship attendance during that year was 2,212, while church membership stood at 1,280.⁹ The church takes careful steps to maintain health by requiring a well-developed membership process, by encouraging faithfulness and involvement, by keeping members accountable to the church covenant, and by continually updating church roles.¹⁰

Conversion growth, however, is also a key sign of church health. It is this particular aspect of Bethlehem's ministry that needs to be carefully examined by their leadership. A church that has over twelve hundred members and that averaged almost twenty-four hundred in attendance in 2001 should have more conversion growth. In fact, biological conversion growth¹¹ alone should account for more annual baptisms than Bethlehem has experienced in some more recent years.

There are two recommendations this author would make to improve conversion growth at BBC. First, the church needs to increase the amount of attention and resources given to discipling and assimilating new converts. As noted earlier, there were 231 recorded conversions in the year 2000, but only 39 baptisms. The staff and leadership need to closely examine their follow-up procedures and their assimilation processes to discover why a larger number of those that come to Christ are not following through with committed church membership.

The second recommendation this author would make to improve conversion

⁹Bethlehem Baptist Church, "2001 Annual Report," Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, January 2002, 1, 47.

¹⁰Ibid. This annual report, like many of the others, details efforts made during the year to contact inactive members and to cleanse and update the church roles.

¹¹Biological Conversion Growth is conversion growth resulting from the salvation and baptism of children born to families in the congregation.

growth would be an emphasis upon personal evangelistic intentionality among the church leadership. They must realize that evangelism is not a spiritual gift given only to some, it is the natural activity and the joyful duty of all who know Christ. In particular, Piper himself should seek more opportunities to personally share his faith in his everyday settings. In so doing, he would embody the natural result of his passionate theology and he would set a profound example before his people without having to shift the focus of his ministry away from his primary calling. The other staff members, elders, and leaders should do the same. Visible, active involvement in personal evangelism at the leadership level would do much to inspire more fervent evangelistic efforts in the church as a whole. If each leader would commit to win only one person to Christ each year and mentor them into active membership, Bethlehem would experience annual baptisms in the hundreds.

The aforementioned weakness does not detract from the fact that John Piper fulfills a unique and important role in contemporary Christianity. As a pastor-theologian, he truly stands alone in reasserting the God-entranced theology of Jonathan Edwards and in calling for men to find their greatest happiness and satisfaction in God. Through Christian Hedonism, he is calling evangelicals to rediscover the joy of God-centeredness and the valuable foundations of reformed theology. His own church manifests these priorities. Piper has built a ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church that reflects his theological depth and embodies his missionary passion. In fact, this author knows of no other reformed church that combines thorough biblical training with a strong missionary focus the way BBC does.¹² In both urban ministry and in foreign missions, BBC sets forth a new standard for theologically-driven evangelism. May evangelicalism as a whole look

¹²This comment is the author's opinion formed through brief comparisons with other prominent Reformed ministries.

to their shining example and return to the theological heritage of its youth.

APPENDIX 1

QUEST FOR JOY¹

Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths

Did you know that God commands us to be glad?

"Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37:4)

1) God created us for his glory

"Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth,... whom I created for my glory" (Isaiah 43:6-7)

God made us to magnify his greatness - the way telescopes magnify stars. He created us to put his goodness and truth and beauty and wisdom and justice on display. The greatest display of God's glory comes from deep delight in all that he is. This means that God gets the praise and we get the pleasure. God created us so that he is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

2) Every human should live for God's glory

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

If God made us for his glory, it is clear that we should live for his glory. Our duty comes from his design. So our first obligation is to show God's value by being satisfied with all that he is for us. This is the essence of loving God (Matthew 22:37) and trusting him (1 John 5:3-4) and being thankful to him (Psalm 100:2-4) It is the root of all true obedience, especially loving others (Colossians 1:4-5).

3) All of us have failed to glorify God as we should

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

What does it mean to "fall short of the glory of God?" It means that none of us has trusted and treasured God the way we should. We have not been satisfied with his greatness and walked in his ways. We have sought our satisfaction in other things, and treated them as more valuable than God, which is the essence of idolatry (Romans 1:21-23). Since sin

¹John Piper, "Quest for Joy: Six Biblical Truths," tract distributed by Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, n.d. Also available from http://desiringgod.org/library/what_we_believe/quest4joy.html; Internet.

came into the world we have all been deeply resistant to having God as our all-satisfying treasure (Ephesians 2:3). This is an appalling offense to the greatness of God (Jeremiah 2:12-13).

4) All of us are subject to God's just condemnation

"The wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23).

We have all belittled the glory of God. How? By preferring other things above him. By our ingratitude, distrust and disobedience. So God is just in shutting us out from the enjoyment of his glory forever. "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

The word "hell" is used in the New Testament twelve times - eleven times by Jesus himself. It is not a myth created by dismal and angry preachers. It is a solemn warning from the Son of God who died to deliver sinners from its curse. We ignore it at great risk. If the Bible stopped here in its analysis of the human condition, we would be doomed to a hopeless future. However, this is not where it stops...

5) God sent his only Son Jesus to provide eternal life and joy

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Timothy 1:15)

The good news is that Christ died for sinners like us. And he rose physically from the dead to validate the saving power of his death and to open the gates of eternal life and joy (1 Corinthians 15:20). This means God can acquit guilty sinners and still be just (Romans 3:25-26). "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). Coming home to God is where all deep and lasting satisfaction is found.

6) The benefits purchased by the death of Christ belong to those who repent and trust him

"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out" (Acts 3:19). "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

"Repent" means to turn from all the deceitful promises of sin. "Faith" means being satisfied with all that God promises to be for us in Jesus. "He who believes in me," Jesus says, "shall never thirst" (John 6:35). We do not earn our salvation. We cannot merit it (Romans 4:4-5). It is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is a free gift (Romans 3:24). We will have it if we cherish it above all things (Matthew 13:44). When we do that, God's aim in creation is accomplished: He is glorified in us and we are satisfied in him - forever.

Does this make sense to you?

Do you desire the kind of gladness that comes from being satisfied with all that God is for you in Jesus? If so, then God is at work in your life.

What should you do?

Turn from the deceitful promises of sin. Call upon Jesus to save you from the guilt and punishment and bondage. "All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). Start banking your hope on all that God is for you in Jesus. Break the power of sin's promises by faith in the superior satisfaction of God's promises. Begin reading the Bible to find his precious and very great promises, which can set you free (2 Peter 1:3-4). Find a Bible-believing church and begin to worship and grow together with other people who treasure Christ above all things (Philippians 3:7).

The best news in the world is that there is no necessary conflict between our happiness and God's holiness. Being satisfied with all that God is for us in Jesus magnifies him as a great Treasure.

"You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." (Psalm 16:11)

APPENDIX 2

BETHLEHEM BAPTIST CHURCH AFFIRMATION OF FAITH¹

The Word of God

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21; Mark 13:31; John 8:31, 32; John 20:31; Acts 20:32.

The Trinity

We believe that there is one living and true God, eternally existing in three persons; that these are equal in every divine perfection, and that they execute distinct but harmonious offices in the work of creation, providence and redemption. Genesis 1:1, 26; John 1:1, 3; Matthew 28:19; John 4:24; Romans 1:19, 20; Ephesians 4:5, 6.

God The Father

We believe in God the Father, an infinite, personal spirit, perfect in holiness, wisdom, power, and love. We believe that He infallibly foreknows all that shall come to pass, that He concerns Himself mercifully in the affairs of each person, that He hears and answers prayer, and that He saves from sin and death all who come to Him through Jesus Christ. Luke 10:21, 22; Matthew 23:9; John 3:16; 6:27; Romans 1:7; 1 Timothy 1:1, 2; 2:5, 6; 1 Peter 1:3; Revelation 1:6.

Jesus Christ

We believe in Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit. We believe in His virgin birth, sinless life, miracles and teachings. We believe in His substitutionary atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension into heaven, perpetual intercession for His people and personal visible return to earth. Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; John 1:1; 20:28; Romans 9:5; 8:46; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:21-23; John 20:30, 31; Matthew 20:28; Ephesians 1:4; Acts 1:11; Romans 5:6-8; 6:9, 10; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Timothy 3:16.

¹Bethlehem Baptist Church, "Affirmation of Faith: Bethlehem Baptist Church" [on-line]; accessed 26 January 2001; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/library/what_we_believe/affirmation.html; Internet.

The Holy Spirit

We believe in the Holy Spirit who came forth from the Father and Son to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment and to regenerate, sanctify and empower all who believe in Jesus Christ. We believe that the Holy Spirit indwells every believer in Christ, and that He is an abiding helper, teacher and guide. John 14:16, 17, 26; John 16:9-14; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; Galatians 5:22-26.

Regeneration

We believe that man was created by God in His own image; that he sinned and thereby incurred physical, spiritual and eternal death, which is separation from God, that as a consequence, all human beings are born with a sinful nature and are sinners by choice and therefore under condemnation. We believe that those who repent and forsake sin and trust Jesus Christ as Savior are regenerated by the Holy Spirit and become new creatures, are delivered from condemnation and receive eternal life. Genesis 1:26; 5:2; 3; 2:17; Ecclesiastes 2:11; John 3:14; 5:24; 5:30; 7:13; 8:12; 10:26; Romans 9:22; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelations 19:3, 20; 14:15; 21:18; Psalm 51:7; Jeremiah 17:9; James 1:14; Romans 3:19; 5:19; Proverbs 28:13; 1 John 1:9; John 3:16; John 1:13; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 8:1.

The Church

We believe in the universal church, a living spiritual body of which Christ is the head and all regenerated persons are members. We believe in the local church, consisting of a company of believers in Jesus Christ, baptized on a credible profession of faith, and associated for worship, work and fellowship. We believe that God has laid upon the members of the local church the primary task of giving the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world. Ephesians 2:19-22; Acts 1:8; Ephesians 5:19-21; Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:23-25.

Christian Conduct

We believe that a Christian should live for the glory of God and the well-being of his fellow men; that his conduct should be blameless before the world; that he should be a faithful steward of his possessions; and that he should seek to realize for himself and others the full stature of maturity in Christ. 1 Corinthians 10:31; Romans 12:1-3; Hebrews 12:1, 2; John 14:15, 23, 24; 1 John 2:3-6; 2 Corinthians 9:6-9; 1 Corinthians 4:2; Colossians 1:9, 10.

The Ordinances

We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ has committed two ordinances to the local church, baptism and the Lord's Supper. We believe that Christian baptism is the immersion of the believer in water into the name of the triune God. We believe that the Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ for commemoration of His death. We believe that these two ordinances should be observed and administered until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 6:3-5; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

Religious Liberty

We believe that every human being has direct relations with God and is responsible to God alone in all matters of faith; that each church is independent and must be free from interference by any ecclesiastical or political authority; that therefore, Church and State must be kept separate as having different functions, each fulfilling its duties free from dictation or patronage of the other. 1 Timothy 2:5; Romans 14:7-9, 12.

Church Cooperation

We believe that local churches can best promote the cause of Jesus Christ by cooperating with one another in a denominational organization. Such an organization, whether a regional or district conference, exists and functions by the will of the churches. Cooperation in a conference is voluntary and may be terminated at any time. Acts 15:36, 41; 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:1; Galatians 1:1-3; Revelation 1:4, 10, 11.

The Last Things

We believe in the personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth and the establishment of His kingdom. We believe in the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, the eternal felicity of the righteous and the endless suffering of the wicked. Matthew 16:27; Mark 14:62; John 14:3; Acts 1:11; Philippians 3:20; 1 Thessalonians 4:15; 2 Timothy 4:1; Titus 2:13; 1 Corinthians 4:5, 15; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; Revelation 20:4-6, 11-15.

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ABSTRACT

THEOLOGICAL TENETS OF THE EVANGELISTIC MINISTRY OF JOHN PIPER DURING THE YEARS 1980-2002

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This dissertation delineates the theological tenets of John Piper's evangelistic ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. In addition to his basic conservative, evangelical presuppositions, there are four theological tenets that drive the evangelistic ministry of John Piper: the sovereignty and supremacy of God, the depraved affections of man, conversion as the creation of a Christian Hedonist, and the glorifying witness of the church.

Chapter 1 addresses Piper's role in modern evangelicalism as a recovery theologian. He is one of several pastors and authors calling evangelicals to recover the god-centered theology of the reformers. Piper's unique perspective of Christian Hedonism is his prescribed vehicle for that recovery. The theology of evangelism springing from this perspective is particularly valuable as a remedy for the atheological pragmatism currently driving so many evangelical churches.

Chapter 2 is biographical in nature, exploring Piper's life and theological development. In addition to describing the experiences of his conversion and call to ministry, this chapter details the pivotal awakening he experienced at Fuller Seminary that

led to the development of Christian Hedonism and his subsequent espousal of Calvinism. This chapter also recounts the theological developments Piper has experienced during his pastorate, including the missiological awakening that took place at Bethlehem Baptist Church during the mid 1980s.

Chapter 3 then delineates the four theological tenets and the sub-points that embody the evangelistic aspects of each tenet. His published writings are the primary sources for this chapter, and the material reflects his affinity for Edwards and his God-centered hermeneutic.

Chapter 4 examines five facets of Piper's ministry to prove that the theological tenets delineated in chapter three do indeed define and drive the evangelistic ministries of Bethlehem Baptist Church. Preaching, prayer, discipleship, outreach (local and global), and Piper's writing ministry are each examined to show the foundational presence of the four tenets in the evangelistic aspects of each ministry.

Chapter 5 closes the dissertation by summarizing the material presented in chapters three and four. The final section of this fifth chapter briefly addresses the strengths and weaknesses of Piper's theology of evangelism and Bethlehem's evangelistic ministries.

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