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DEVELOPING A PREACHING SERIES ON THE PRIORITY  
OF THE LOCAL CHURCH GATHERING FOR  
O'BRIEN BAPTIST CHURCH,  
O'BRIEN, TEXAS

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

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

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by  
Charles William Shira, Jr.

December 2016

**APPROVAL SHEET**

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O'BRIEN, TEXAS

Charles William Shira, Jr.

Read and Approved by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Brian J. Vickers (Faculty Supervisor)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Shane Parker

Date \_\_\_\_\_

To my parents,  
Charlie and Terry Shira,  
who have supported me through every endeavor,  
and my beautiful wife, Katie,  
who always encouraged me to see this project finished.

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## PREFACE

This project was started while I was working with college students and young adults at Mobberly Baptist Church, Longview, Texas. Since my performance was measured primarily through my students' attendance on Sunday mornings, I saw firsthand the inconsistency that college students have toward the local church, and so I began trying to build a project that would teach them the importance of the local church in their spiritual lives. I am thankful for my time there and the opportunity to view the church through their eyes. It's not that they don't love the church, or their relationship with God; it's just that they've been taught an incomplete version of the church their entire lives. I was looking forward to the opportunity to raise the priority of the local church in their lives, but God decided to move my wife and me before the project could be implemented.

I found the opportunity to implement and complete this project while serving the wonderful people at O'Brien Baptist Church in O'Brien, Texas. What the church lacks in size, it makes up for in love. I am forever grateful to these people for giving me the opportunity to be their pastor, and I am thankful that their name will be attached to this project forever. I am honored that I get the opportunity to try to raise the priority of the local church in their lives on a daily basis, and that this project became part of our foundation together as a church.

I cannot thank my parents, Charlie and Terry Shira, enough for supporting me

financially ever since I first made the leap from the professional workplace to full-time ministry. I have been able to serve others in ministry better through their love and support. They have been a blessing to me, and thus to those I've served in ministry over the years, and I cannot thank them enough for their support when I felt called to pursue degree after degree. I'm sure they, along with my wife, are as happy as anyone that this project signals the end of my pursuit of higher education.

When I started this project I was single. My wife and I began dating about half way through my seminars, and she has always been a blessing and encouragement to me through this process. When the Lord moved us during my writing phase, and obstacles came that seemed to prevent me from completing this project, I truly considered just quitting the program. But she would not consider that option for a moment. It was her insistence that I finish my doctorate, and I am eternally grateful for her support of something that often had me in the office and away from her. Her love and support of me is great, and I cannot thank her enough.

My prayer for this project is that it can be used by others to continue promoting the priority of the local church in the life of believers. I love the local church, and my love for the church caused me to pursue this degree. I pray this project, which signals the end of this pursuit, is a fitting tribute to the local church.

Chas Shira

O'Brien, Texas

December 2016

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to develop a preaching series on the priority of the local church gathering for the members of O'Brien Baptist Church, O'Brien, Texas.

#### **Goals**

The first goal of this project was to determine whether church members see the local church gathering as necessary to their spiritual development, and determine where church attendance and participation ranks as a priority in their life. A survey was constructed that seeks to determine their current belief in the priority of the local church for their spiritual development. This goal was deemed successful if at least 30 church members complete and return the survey, both before and after the series.

The second goal of this project was to develop the preaching series on the local church. This series was created by examining the Scriptures and other writings on ecclesiology to formulate a simple, basic concept of the local church so that church members would understand the necessity of their participation within the local church. This goal was measured by my faculty supervisor, who evaluated the series' contents, and the goal was considered successful when the supervisor approved the chapter.

The third goal of this project was to preach the series on the priority of the local church gathering. This goal was measured by redistributing the initial survey and

measuring the difference in their scores, to see whether or not the series was effective in increasing their understanding of the priority of the local church in their lives. A t-test for dependent samples was used to determine whether there was a positive statistical difference between the surveys distributed prior to the beginning of the preaching series. This goal was deemed successful if there was a positive statistical difference in questions when comparing the two surveys, which verified the preaching series was effective in raising the priority of the local church in the lives of the members of O'Brien Baptist Church.

### **Ministry Context**

This ministry project took place at O'Brien Baptist Church in O'Brien, Texas. O'Brien has long been a small farming community in what is commonly known as West Texas, where wheat and cotton fields line the highways for miles, and there are probably more cattle than humans in some counties. With advances in farming technology over the years, many of the towns in these areas have seen populations drop as the opportunity for jobs dwindled as technology allowed a man to farm more acres of land than had previously been thought possible. In 2010 the population of O'Brien was 106, down almost 20 percent from 2000 when it was 132.<sup>1</sup>

Many members of O'Brien Baptist Church live outside the city limits of O'Brien on farms and ranches, while other members reside in Knox City, Texas. Knox City is only three miles from O'Brien, and the two communities share a consolidated school district. The elementary and high school campuses are located in Knox City,

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<sup>1</sup>Information taken from USA.com, accessed May 4, 2015, [www.usa.com/o-brien-tx](http://www.usa.com/o-brien-tx).

while the middle school campus is located in O'Brien. In 2010 the population of Knox City was 1,130, down from 1,219 in 2000.<sup>2</sup>

O'Brien Baptist Church has seen attendance fluctuate over the years, most of it in sync with the overall population of the area. In 1962 the church was recognized as an "outstanding church" by the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in category III, which represented churches with a membership of 300-499. However, by 1986 on a commemorative Sunday in November celebrating the history of the church there were around 90 members present. Today the church continues to average around 65 in worship, with an average attendance of 30 in Sunday School, which immediately precedes the morning worship service. There is also a mid-week prayer meeting and Bible study on Wednesday nights at the church, which has an average attendance of 15 adults.

The church has ministries on Sunday mornings that are tailored to all age groups. The church will also host special events such as Vacation Bible School during the year that are targeted ministry activities. However, there is no doubt that the primary ministry of the church occurs on Sunday mornings during the worship service, and during the Bible study hour that immediately precedes the worship service.

### **Rationale**

The local church is the primary institution for learning and growth in the Christian life. From Peter's confession that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God in Matthew 16, God has continued to build his church and promised that even

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<sup>2</sup>Information taken from USA.com, accessed May 4, 2015, [www.usa.com/knox-city-tx](http://www.usa.com/knox-city-tx).

the gates of hell would never prevail against it. However, the local church is struggling today in its primacy and relevance in the lives of its members as many are becoming increasingly casual in their relationship to this ordained institution. It is not uncommon to encounter people who identify O'Brien Baptist Church as their local church, but they might attend on a Sunday only once every 4 to 6 weeks; this trend is unacceptable.

Therefore, since the current trend appeared to be for people to remain disconnected or connected to the church at a very casual level, this project was deemed necessary for two reasons. First, it appears that the primary problem lies within a person's beliefs and his or her desire to be connected with the local church. In fact, it is assumed that most Christians have no understanding of their critical need to be part of a local church, and the crucial role they play in the life of the church. The church must gain a better understanding of the current position of a person's beliefs toward the local church in order to learn what doctrines he or she needs to be taught in regard to the necessity and centrality of the local church. This knowledge was gleaned by surveying the current members. Second, this project developed a preaching series on the local church that helps believers know the importance of their being involved with the local church. Without this project it appears that most of our members would have continued with their lackadaisical approach to church attendance and involvement, therefore preventing the church from becoming everything that God intended her to be, while also hampering the spiritual development of each individual Christian.

This project's purpose is to bring about change both in the life of members, but also in the life of the church. The goal of this project is to install a biblical understanding of the role of the church in the life of the believer, but also to help the church understand

its role in teaching and encouraging the believers in attendance each week. There could be needed changes both in the priorities of the believers, and also in the practices and organization of the church. Both areas will be addressed and evaluated in order to make sure the church is functioning in its proper role, and that believers are giving the church the proper priority in their lives.

### **Definitions**

There are two key terms used throughout this project that should be understood as follows:

*Member.* For the purposes of this project, a “member” refers to anyone who was currently attending the Sunday morning worship services at O’Brien Baptist Church. Most of the participants in the project, those who completed the initial survey, heard the sermons, and then completed the final survey were indeed members of the church, meaning they have made a public profession of faith at some point in their lives and were subsequently baptized, and have publicly identified by asking for membership at O’Brien Baptist Church. However, there were possibly a few who have not officially joined the church, but participated in the project, and would therefore be technically classified as “attenders” rather than “members,” but for the purpose of this project and for simplicity’s sake all participants are referred to as members throughout the project.

*Gathering.* For the purposes of this project, the “gathering” refers to the Sunday morning worship service at O’Brien Baptist Church.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The first limitation of the project is its length, a total of fifteen weeks. The

second limitation is the subject matter of the preaching series. The series was limited to topics related to ecclesiology, and even those topics were further limited to topics that reinforce the priority of the local church gathering.

The project has three delimitations. First, the group being surveyed and then taught delimits the project because the group only consisted of members of O'Brien Baptist Church. A second delimitation is the fact that all of these people were attending O'Brien Baptist Church, O'Brien, Texas. Therefore, due to the first two delimitations, the target group for this project was made up of approximately 40 to 75 people. Finally, this project sought to increase the understanding of these members regarding the local church gathering and its necessity and centrality within their lives.

### **Research Methodology**

A survey was created and administered that is geared toward measuring the member's current perceptions about the church, and their understanding of its necessity to their spiritual growth. This survey was administered twice, both before and after the preaching series. The survey was administered over three Sunday mornings, in order to make sure as many people as possible had the opportunity to complete the survey.

Over the next two weeks the surveys were collected and tabulated. Information obtained from the surveys was used to determine applications for the preaching series that followed. When needed, survey questions were repeated during the preaching series, and average answers were shared, both positive and negative, in order to show how survey responses lined up with biblical truths. The preaching series was taught over a six-week period during the Sunday morning worship service.

At the conclusion of the preaching series members received the same survey



they completed at the beginning of the project. These surveys were again administered over a three-week period. As the surveys were collected and tabulated, they were scored using the T-Test for dependent samples method.

## CHAPTER 2

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR THE PRIORITY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH GATHERING

#### **Introduction**

The Bible contains many texts concerning the people of God meeting together. This chapter provides a summary of those references so that the reader will understand and believe the truth that participation in a local church gathering should be a priority in the life of a believer. This chapter contains six sections that use passages from both the Old Testament and the New Testament to argue for the thesis that attending the local church gathering should be a priority for the believer.

#### **Gathered Together at Mt. Sinai**

There is a definite pattern in the OT of the people of God gathering to meet together with the Lord. This section focuses primarily on the initial gathering of God's people at Mt. Sinai, referencing verses from Exodus 19 and 24, and identifying the basic tenets from the first time that God gathered his people.

In Exodus 19 the people of Israel are encamped in the wilderness of Sinai, three months after leaving their bondage in Egypt. The Lord has worked many miracles through the plagues that triggered their release from Egypt, through the provision of food and water as they traveled, and through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, which sealed their escape from Pharaoh in Exodus 14. The Lord reminds the people of these

miracles telling them in Exodus 19:4 that he “bore [them] on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” Now that he has redeemed them, he intends to meet with them. In Exodus 19:17 Moses brings the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they “take their stand at the foot of the mountain.” This initial gathering of God’s people sets the foundation for further meetings throughout the rest of Scripture, and for such meetings that still occur today; God’s people continue to gather together to meet with him. The remainder of this section examines what is occurring at this initial gathering, and how it sets the basis for the future gatherings of God’s people.

### **Gather to Hear**

In Exodus 19 the people are preparing to meet with the Lord and to hear from him. Up to this point the people have identified themselves with God through their ancestors; when God first speaks to Moses in order to send him to redeem his people, he says, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod 3:6). Now God is going to speak with all of his people and lay out his expectations for their behavior. Those expectations for behavior are succinctly written out in stone in Exodus 20.

The first principle from the gathering of God’s people is that they gather in order to hear from him. This principle was true at the first gathering, and it is true for gatherings today. Another important aspect to this first meeting is that God is the initiator; there would be no hearing from him if he did not choose to speak. Enns makes the point clearly: “It is, as we read, ‘the covenant that the Lord has made with you.’ It is by his initiative. He is the instigator. What the Israelites are to do is to accept and agree

to live by the terms of the covenant that God and God alone has stipulated.”<sup>1</sup> God lays out his expectations for the behavior of the people who will be known by his name. In Exodus 19:5-6 the promise for obedience to his stipulations is that the people will be his “treasured possession” among all the peoples of the earth. This is the essence of the offer made by God to a gathered group of people; a list of stipulations for behavior that is fitting for a people bearing his name, along with the promise of blessing and relationship if they choose to accept his offer. The people of God have gathered to hear from the Lord, but they will only be known as his people going forward if they choose to respond with obedience.

### **Gather to Respond**

Once in Exodus 19:8 and twice in Exodus 24:3-8 the people respond together unanimously with the same general message: “Everything the Lord has spoken we will do.” This response to the Lord confirmed their identity as his people going forward, and what is perhaps secondary to the necessary response that people must make to the Lord if they want to be his treasured possession, is the unmistakable truth that here in Exodus 19 and 24 the people answer the Lord “together.” In fact Exodus 24:3 says that the people responded with “one voice.”

The word of God invited a response that day. When the people gathered at Sinai, they could have been expecting any number of things to happen. Durham writes, “As exciting as his advent onto the mountain, more amazing still is his address to all the

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 490.

people waiting, in which he gives himself to them more fully still by trusting them to enter into covenant with him.”<sup>2</sup> They were certainly shown favor by simply being at the meeting, but if they had only heard the covenant that God had offered, and the expectations within, and had not responded affirmatively, they would have ceased to have been known as God’s people. God’s people gather together to hear the word of the Lord, but if they do not respond affirmatively to the word of God, they are not the people of God.

The aspect of the people of God responding to him together is crucial to understanding the importance of the local church. While there was not a place for the text to be explored in depth in this paper, a stunning story that supports this truth comes from Ezra 9-10. In Ezra the realization of sin within the ranks of God’s people has become known, and the people gather “together” to decide how to remedy this sin from within their families. The reason they gather to purge sin is that they all realized they must do so in order to maintain their identity as the people of God.<sup>3</sup> If the people had not chosen to remedy their sins, they would have forfeited their identity as the people of God, because God’s people from Mount Sinai forward are known by their response of obedience to his word.

### **Gather to Identify**

When people gather to hear God’s word and respond positively as the Israelites did in Exodus 19 and 24, that gathering of people becomes known as God’s people. As

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<sup>2</sup>John Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 274.

<sup>3</sup>H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 16 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 160.

God promised, “if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples” (Exod 19:5). A failure to continue obeying God’s word means a loss of their identity, as the people in Ezra understood. Therefore, in gatherings today, churches, must remember these simple truths. Many churches gather weekly, and while they may use God’s word in sermons or in readings, their use of his word is powerless if those gatherings of people are not responding to the word of the Lord with obedience. When there is hearing with no responding, there is no identity as God’s people.

### **Summary**

This section provides a foundation for the priority of God’s people meeting together. Gathering to hear and then responding to God with obedience is the ideal pattern for all future meetings of God’s people, and is the best way for his people to show their identity to the rest of the world. Jesus has this idea of a foundation in mind when he closed his Sermon on the Mount with the illustration of two builders in Matthew 7:24-27. In his illustration, both builders “hear” the word of God, but only one “does” the word of God; the one who “does” the word is said to have built his house on a firm foundation, while the one who only hears has built on the sand. Hearing and responding with obedience builds the foundation for identity as God’s people.

### **The Early Church Devoted Together**

There is no earlier snapshot available of the infant church than the one Luke provides in Acts 2:42-47. Polhill calls this the “ideal portrait” of the church.<sup>4</sup> Barrett

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<sup>4</sup>John Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 122.

described it as “an idealized picture of the earliest church.”<sup>5</sup> However, describing it as idealized does not mean that the community here should be seen as an unrealistic fantasy, which would negate the significance of examining the early church and learning from its habits. This portrait of the church shows the church in infancy, literally just days after birth from Peter’s sermon at Pentecost. The early church could be said to be following the Spirit because they had all just received the Spirit, and had no preconceptions. This section identifies the focus of the early church. If the early church was doing things right, so that they would even be described as an ideal church, then there is benefit in examining this snapshot closely and determining what has caused the early church to be placed on such a pedestal.

### **Devoted to the Apostles’ Teaching**

In Acts 2:42 the term “devoted” is mentioned for the first and only time within the pericope, but its influence is felt throughout the passage. These early church members are said to have been devoted to the apostles’ teaching. Later, in Acts 2:46, this devotion to their teaching is said to have caused the church to attend the temple together “day by day.” The assumption is that at some point in the day, the majority of the church is going to the temple and listening to the teaching of the apostles. This is before a canonized version of the NT was available, so most of what the early church had was the teaching from the apostles, which was primarily their recollection of Jesus’ teachings. Bruce writes, “This teaching was authoritative because it was the teaching of the Lord communicated through the apostles in the power of the Spirit. For believers of later

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<sup>5</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 166.

generations the NT scriptures form the written deposit of the apostolic teaching.”<sup>6</sup>

This devotion cannot be just a hearing of God’s word. As was noted in the first section of this chapter, the people of God are known as his people only when they are responding to the word of God with obedience. Barrett writes, “The steady persistence in the apostles’ teaching means (a) that the Christians listened to the apostles whenever they taught and (b) that they assiduously practiced what they heard.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Devoted to the Fellowship**

Fellowship was not just a term used to describe social gatherings. In fact, the Greek word used here for fellowship at times can refer to a group or gathering. Therefore, it seems important to not be too narrow in defining fellowship and to allow for the overall sense of the passage to have impact: they were devoted to *one another*.

Undoubtedly, part of their fellowship was devoted to social gatherings. The “breaking of bread” is mentioned twice in Acts 2:42-46, and they were also said to have “received their food [in their homes] with glad and generous hearts.” However, the debate as to what the “breaking of bread” signified is ongoing. Barrett believes that by the time of Luke’s writing the sacramental observance of the Lord’s Supper had not been separated from a common meal, and that even the term “breaking of bread” was never used by the Jewish people to represent a meal.<sup>8</sup> Bruce also believes that “breaking of bread” seems to have in view the Lord’s Supper, and argues that due to the size of the congregation and structure of the temple precincts the meal had to be shared by

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<sup>6</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1988), 73.

<sup>7</sup>Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 163.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 161, 165.



households.<sup>9</sup> While it seems the majority of commentators hold to the view that the Lord's Supper is in view in these verses, the overall concept of fellowship and devotion to one another seems a better fit to the descriptions. Peterson explains:

To 'break bread' was to eat together. The adoption of this term as a title for the Lord's Supper is not formally attested until the second century. When Luke mentions in v. 46 that they were 'breaking bread in their homes,' he goes right on to say (literally), 'they were partaking of food.' What is the ground for giving the expression a different meaning in v. 42? The reality of Christian fellowship was expressed from the earliest times in the ordinary activity of eating together. But these meals were doubtless given a special character by the fact that they were associated with teaching, prayer, and praise.<sup>10</sup>

Peterson's argument seems sound because the purpose of the overall passage was to describe the community that was already present in the young church. The early church was sharing even the most fundamental and basic of human functions together: mealtime, but as Luke records, this was not the limit to what was being shared.

The believers had so much in common that some were even selling their possessions so that the proceeds could be distributed to those in need. Barnabas is said to have done this in Acts 4:32-37, and Scripture says that all who believed were of one heart and soul. This generosity among the believers is said to have been due to their common faith. Barrett likes to say that the early church "believed themselves, as it were, into a society."<sup>11</sup> Bruce is right to emphasize that this pooling of property could only have come about if "their sense of spiritual unity was exceptionally active."<sup>12</sup> Some have

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<sup>9</sup>Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 73-74.

<sup>10</sup>David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 161.

<sup>11</sup>Barret, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 167.

<sup>12</sup>Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 74.

surmised that this sharing of possessions only came about because the church believed in the soon and imminent return of Christ, but Bock is right in pointing out that the reason for their sharing of property is social and not eschatological.<sup>13</sup> The early church did not practice communism, but rather true community where if one member had a need, the entire church saw it as their own and did whatever was necessary to alleviate the suffering.

### **Devoted to the Prayers**

Finally, the early church was said to be devoted to the prayers, which is the final portion of the triad of devotions mentioned in Acts 2:42. While prayers are delineated by a definite article in the Greek, perhaps suggesting a specific set or system of prayers, no such reference is believed to have been intended. At the start of the next chapter in Acts, Peter and John go to the temple at the “hour of prayer,” certainly a reference to the Jewish system of prayers throughout the day. However, the emphasis here is best seen as simply a general reference to the prayer life of the entire church, and as something that they were devoted to as a whole. Their dependence on their faith in Jesus as the glue that held them together as a community also led them to be devoted and dependent on him through consistent prayer. Prayer that was so consistent that the early church was said to be a church who was devoted to prayer.

### **Summary**

This passage not only consists of a prescription for churches today referring to

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<sup>13</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 153.

what they should be devoted to, but it also provides a description of the results of such devotion. In Acts 2:47 the church is said to have “favor with all the people” and that the Lord was adding to their number “day by day.” Their devotion to Scripture, one another, and prayer created an environment that was conducive to the growth of the church. This triad of devotion provides a basis for blessing both from men and from God. Bock says,

The portrait of the early church in Acts shows that community and the welfare of the group were a priority. This attitude reflected spiritual maturity that allowed the church to grow. In the case of this earliest community, the believers’ preaching was matched by their community, making a powerful testimony for their mission.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Blood that Brings Us Together**

The next passage to be used in support of the priority of the local church gathering is Hebrews 10:19-25. Throughout the book of Hebrews, the author argues for the benefits of the transition to the new covenant. He shows that Jesus is a much better high priest, but the highlight of his argument is distinguishing between blood in the old covenant and in the new covenant. In the old covenant, a priest stands daily offering repeatedly the same sacrifices (the blood of goats and calves, Heb 9:12) which can never take away sins (Heb 10:11). However, Jesus entered once and for all into the true holy places with his own blood (Heb 9:12) and afterward sat down at the right hand of God (Heb 10:12). The new covenant is better in so many respects, but none greater than the distinction in blood that is offered. The blood of Jesus is what brings the church together.

### **Draw Near through Faith**

The church is urged to draw near to God through faith in Jesus. In fact, the

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<sup>14</sup>Bock, *Acts*, 155.

church is urged to draw closer to God than most men were ever allowed to do in the old covenant by the author's references to the "holy places" and "the curtain" in Hebrews 10:19-20. The curtain allusion refers to what is commonly known as the 'Holy of Holies.' Bruce explains the exclusivity of entering this area: "In it not all the people could exercise this privilege, but the high priest only, as their representative; and even he could not exercise the privilege any time he chose, but at fixed times and under fixed conditions."<sup>15</sup> However, the Scriptures now say that anyone who has faith can enter confidently into the holiest of places because of the blood of Jesus. Guthrie writes, "As the old covenant priest had to pass through the veil, the new covenant people of God enter his presence via the sacrificial death of Christ."<sup>16</sup>

To further emphasize this point the writer of Hebrews describes those who draw near to God in faith have had "their hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and their bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:22). This is undoubtedly a reference to the procedure through which the old covenant priests were made clean before entering through the curtain to perform their duties. Some commentators have found here a reference to Christian baptism. Bruce admits that "there is something incongruous in correlating the figurative sprinkling of the heart and the literal washing of the body," but he later states that he believes the reference to water does in fact relate to Christian baptism.<sup>17</sup> His argument about the incongruity of a figurative and literal phrase side by

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<sup>15</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 249.

<sup>16</sup>George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 343.

<sup>17</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 254-55.

side seems best, which leads to the conclusion that both phrases should be interpreted as figurative. Guthrie is right when he says that commentators too often and too quickly find a reference to Christian baptism.<sup>18</sup>

### **Hold Fast to Hope**

The church drew near in confident faith because of the blood of Jesus, but they also were told to hold fast together their hope in Jesus. Certainly the original readers of Hebrews knew of the tearing of the curtain in the earthly temple, but whether or not access had truly been granted in the heavenly scene was one they would have to believe in through hope. There is encouragement in Hebrews 10:23 because the writer reminds readers that the hope of Christians is secured by God's faithfulness, not their own. The strength of the hope of Christians lies in the object of their hope. The word pairing of "confession" with "hope" following a verse some believe contains a reference to Christian baptism, leads some scholars to conclude a type of baptismal confession is in view. However, Lane says, "This understanding rests on the assumption that v. 22b and v. 23 go together. The syntactical structure of the passage, however, favors the viewpoint that v. 22 and v. 23 express separate ideas."<sup>19</sup> While his argument here is sound Lane still sees a reference to Christian baptism in the preceding verse, despite the evidence he cites against it in this verse.<sup>20</sup> The hope of the community is kept from wavering when they invoke the final consideration of stirring one another up to love and good works.

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<sup>18</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 344.

<sup>19</sup>William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 288.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 287.

## Stir Up to Love

The final encouragement for the church is the longest and perhaps all-encompassing. They are encouraged to think about how to “stir one another to love and good works” (Heb 10:24). The verb used for “stir” in the Greek is not used often in the NT. Hughes notes that it is used in reference to an argument between Paul and Barnabas and therefore says that the best way to interpret the passage is for the church to think of “ways in which it can be positive irritants.”<sup>21</sup> Whatever the specific action, there is no doubt that the church must stir up one another together to produce love and good works.

One specific means of doing this stirring must be making sure that no one neglects the gatherings of the church. Guthrie says that some “may have been discouraged from Christian gatherings by the threat of persecution, by the delay of the Parousia, by continued connections with the Jewish synagogue, or by mere apathy.”<sup>22</sup> Some of those possible reasons are extremely specific, and since the writer of Hebrews chooses not to mention one specifically, most commentators assume the problem was apathy. Some in the church already believed that they could continue in the faith without the aid of the other believers. Bruce goes on to say that “to withdraw from the society of their fellow-believers was to court spiritual defeat; only by remaining united could they preserve their faith and witness.”<sup>23</sup> Lane is right in pointing out the primary reason behind their neglecting to meet together: “The neglect of worship and fellowship was symptomatic of a catastrophic failure to appreciate the significance of Christ’s priestly

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<sup>21</sup>R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 36.

<sup>22</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 345.

<sup>23</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 258.

ministry and the access to God it provided.”<sup>24</sup> To neglect joining with the community in worship and fellowship means that a person has failed to fully appreciate the blood of Jesus.

The final encouragement in Hebrews 10:25 is that the church should stir one another up and keep encouraging one another even more as they see “the Day” drawing near. There is almost unanimous agreement among commentators and translators that “the Day” is in reference to the Day of Judgment. However, in the spirit of the passage where the church (“let us”) is consistently reminded to do all these things together, it seems that the reference to “the Day” could also be a reminder that the church will for all eternity be doing these things together. The church should do these things together today because when eternity begins they will be doing them together for all time. Lane points out that the “triad of faith, hope, and love” emerge in this passage, and as Scripture says, love is the only one of these three that will endure.<sup>25</sup> If he is right, then “the Day” is certainly referencing the time where faith and hope will cease, but love will endure as the church beholds Jesus face to face together for all time.

## **Summary**

If the overall purpose of the author of Hebrews is to convince readers of the significance of the blood of Jesus, then his purpose in Hebrews 10:19-25 is to convince readers of the importance of together valuing the blood of Jesus. They are encouraged to do this together; “let us” do all these things. The strength of a believer’s continuing faith

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<sup>24</sup>Lane, *Hebrews*, 290.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 289.

lies in the strength of his connection to his community. Guthrie mentions one of the greatest earthly examples of this type of relationship by citing the giant redwood trees that grow in the western United States.<sup>26</sup> These giant sequoias will grow to several hundred feet in height, but amazingly, some of their roots will only extend three feet into the soil. These trees survive because their roots will grow horizontally, and intertwine with other sequoias. The strength of a church comes from their enthusiasm to connect with one another and stir one another's faith, hope, and love, and this only happens when each believer is struck daily by what the blood of Jesus has accomplished for each of them.

### **The Spirit that Brings Us Together**

Small, local churches, exhibit incredible diversity. Even small communities show diversity of race, socio-economic status, and varying educational levels. In essence, a church is never made up of only one type of person, and churches that seem to market themselves around one type of identity (a "cowboy church" for example) would be missing out on the diversity God intends. His purpose in diversity is so that through the Holy Spirit he can bring unity to even the most diverse groups of people.

The previous passage from Hebrews 10:19-25 demonstrated how the church can come together through their recognition of their common sprinkling by the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus is how the church is able to pursue the Lord together. Expanding upon this idea of unity and how the church comes together is the purpose behind 1 Corinthians 12. As Paul writes to the church in Corinth, he acknowledges that

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<sup>26</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 352.



there are both “Jews or Greeks, slave or free” (1 Cor 12:12) within the congregation, but they are all one not just through their common redemption through the blood of Jesus (Heb 12), but because they have the same Spirit. The Spirit of God does many things in the life of the church, and in the life of the believer, but none might be as important as his role in bringing the church together.

### **The Same Spirit**

The metaphor that Paul will use throughout 1 Corinthians 12 is that of the human body. The human body has many different parts, but they all come together to make up one body. With this metaphor, Paul illustrates what the Spirit is doing in bringing the church together. Each person might represent a different part of the body, but through the Spirit each part contributes to making up the whole. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 Paul talks about all of the varieties of gifts, service, and activities within the local church, but freely acknowledges that while each of those is different, “it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Cor 12:6). This idea of God’s empowering them all individually, but in different ways, fits the context of the overall letter nicely as in the previous chapter Paul is scolding the Corinthian church for the divisions among them that manifest themselves during the eating of the Lord’s Supper. Just as church members are to see themselves as partaking of the same body and blood of Jesus, they should also realize that they each have the same Spirit within them. This recognition of the Spirit within each of them and a recognition of each person’s gifts helps them to see that God is at work within the local church.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Raymond Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 449.

## The Common Good

After recognizing one another's gifts and being grateful for God's manifestation of himself through them there is the need to understand that those gifts are given for the common good of the church. God gives gifts of the Spirit to individuals not for their benefit, but for the benefit of the entire body. All arguments that believers can have thriving spiritual lives apart from being involved with a local church are squelched by 1 Corinthians 12:7, which reads, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." If people are believers in Jesus Christ, and have the Spirit residing within them, then they are duty bound to connect themselves to a local body of believers so that God can accomplish his purpose in giving them the Spirit by bringing about the building up of others through their gift of the Spirit. Perhaps nothing is more selfish than a believer who refuses to share his or her gift from heaven with others. Thiselton frames the idea behind gifts when he writes, "Gifts are not occasions for boasting but opportunities for service."<sup>28</sup> The Spirit is given as a way of serving and thus connecting with other believers. Thiselton later quotes Suurmond, who even further emphasizes the point: "It is not so much a matter of having a gift as it is being a gift."<sup>29</sup>

The overall meaning of common good cannot be missed; all believers need to be using their gifts at all times, because if their gifts represent a part of the body then a failure to use their gifts means the body of Christ is not functioning properly. Keener says, "If only 5 percent of Christ's body uses its gifts, only 5 percent of the church's

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<sup>28</sup>Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 931.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

work will be fulfilled.”<sup>30</sup> The Spirit is given to each believer not only for the common good of each one within the church, but for the good of the church’s mission in the world.

### **Need One Another**

If the church has a mission to accomplish, and each person within the church provides a key component to that mission, then there is no doubt that another reason for the giving of the Spirit to each one is so that the church will see each member as incredibly valuable to the overall mission of the church. Harper writes, “The lesson the Corinthians had to learn was that the church was a whole, a body. No one member of it could exercise all the necessary functions.”<sup>31</sup> Paul’s condemnation of the church in 1 Corinthians 11 seemed to be related to perhaps different statuses within the church; many suppose that wealthier members of the church were neglecting the poorer members during the meal. Paul is condemning this same attitude here as he describes the body, using the imagery that “the apparently superior cannot say to the apparently inferior, ‘We can get along without you.’”<sup>32</sup>

### **Summary**

With all of the debates over the role of the Spirit within the church, and the function of spiritual gifts, perhaps no greater damage is done to the church when the discussion fails to emphasize the unity that the Spirit brings. The Spirit is the one who

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<sup>30</sup>Craig Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 106.

<sup>31</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), 296.

<sup>32</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1987), 609.

can bring the type of unity and devotion to Scripture, and to one another that was described in Acts 2. Every church surely wants their people more connected, both to one another and to the overall mission of the church as the representative body for Christ on the earth today, but seldom do churches recognize the power and role the Spirit can play in bringing about unity amongst its members. Fee correctly writes, “Our desperate need is for a sovereign work of the Spirit to do among us what all our ‘programmed unity’ cannot.”<sup>33</sup> When the Spirit is identified and recognized in each one of its members, a church begins to breed supernatural unity.

### **Discipline Holds the Church Together**

The passages examined in this section are also about unity, but they involve how the church encourages brothers or sisters who disrupt that unity by living outside of the teachings of God. Sin is an inevitable consequence while on this earth, and even faithful Christians succumb at times to its temptations. The way in which a church handles sin among its members contributes to the value and thus the priority that the local gathering will have within the lives of its members.

The two passages being examined in this section are Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5. The passage in Matthew contains Jesus’ teaching for how a believer should respond to a brother or sister who is sinning, while the passage in 1 Corinthians 5 contains an illustration of how and why this should be handled in the local church through the example of a member who had fallen into sin. Some might wonder why a church would ever publicly rebuke and even remove a member who had fallen into sin,

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<sup>33</sup>Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 607.

but these two extreme measures are always used with the hopes of bringing about redemption and restoration.

### **Some Will Refuse to Repent**

This chapter began with the premise from the book of Exodus that the people of God maintain their identity as his people when they hear and respond with obedience to his word. A failure to hear or respond results in the default of identity as God's people, therefore the church needed a process in which to remove those who had chosen to no longer identify with the teachings of God. In Matthew 18 Jesus lays out a clear plan for confronting those within the community who had fallen into sin. The plan goes from private to public confrontation, with the resulting effect that if the sinner refused to listen to the congregation then he was declared as one outside of the kingdom of God. Keener writes, "Neither outsiders nor the sinner should continue under the delusion that this person is truly a follower of Jesus."<sup>34</sup> The church has a responsibility to both the sinning member and those outside of the church to witness to the world what being a follower of Jesus looks like.

In 1 Corinthians 5 there is an example of a man who was a member of the local church, but then through his actions decided to live by a set of rules that was outside of God's teachings. The text relates a form of incest between the man and a woman he is currently living with who was formerly the wife of his father. Paul relates that the church had responded with pride in some form, but rather should have responded with removal, assuming that the private confrontations that Jesus had instituted in Matthew 18 had not

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<sup>34</sup>Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 454.

been heeded. In this case, this so-called believer had not only violated his church's laws regarding sexual relations, but also those of the Roman society.<sup>35</sup> The church has a responsibility to remove those who refuse to repent, because of the identity that the church carries in the world.

### **A Responsibility to Represent Christ**

The church is the body of Christ, and thus the representative of Christ to the world today. Paul calls the Christian the “ambassador” of God in 2 Corinthians 5:20. Therefore, the church has a responsibility as his people to represent to the world what a life devoted to the teachings of Christ looks like, and be willing to pronounce judgment against their own if needed. Mounce writes that the powers given to the church in Matthew 18 are similar to the ones given to Peter in Matthew 16, the power to “bind or loose” things in heaven.<sup>36</sup> Both passages thus refer to the power of the courts of heaven being given to the church on earth. Keener says, “By removing an unrepentant sinner from Jesus’ community, believers merely ratify the heavenly court’s decree; to borrow Johannine language, they merely remove branches already dead on the vine.”<sup>37</sup> While 1 Corinthians 12 described the church as the body of Christ, a visible representation of Christ here on the earth today, the power given to the church in Matthew 18 seems to attach to the church the ability to represent the heavenly courts of judgment that will someday descend to the earth. Therefore the judgment that the church pronounces upon

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<sup>35</sup>Collins, *First Corinthians*, 209.

<sup>36</sup>Robert Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 176.

<sup>37</sup>Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 455.

its own members should represent to the church and to the world the coming judgment of Christ. Allison says, “Church discipline may be defined as a proleptic (or anticipatory) and declarative sign of the divine eschatological judgment, meted out by Jesus Christ through the church against its sinful members and sinful situations.”<sup>38</sup> A full representation of Christ on earth by the church means a church willing to judge sin amongst its own members.

### **Recognizing that Sin Ruins**

Sin is the destructive force from which every Christian repented when they professed faith in Christ. Therefore it seems that a healthy fear within the congregation of one within their ranks returning to those sins would be needed in order to preserve the integrity of the church body. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul gives the example of yeast when explaining the effects of sin within the church. Collins explains yeast as “an instrument of organic corruption.”<sup>39</sup> The truth is that yeast will continue to spread unless it is removed; the same can be said for sin. The failure of a church to remove sin simply means that they will allow sin to spread within their ranks. Before advances in antibiotics and other medicines, doctors often would simply resort to amputation if an arm or leg was found to be carrying disease that could spread to the rest of the body. These actions, while drastic, were always done in the hope of saving a life; there is no difference when a church is deciding whether or not to discipline a member. If they care about the life of the church, and if they have a healthy fear of how sin will spread, then even amputation

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<sup>38</sup>Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 181.

<sup>39</sup>Collins, *First Corinthians*, 214.

becomes necessary at times. Allison adds that a church decides to remove those who sin, because a failure to do so would result in the entire church bearing the sins of the offender.<sup>40</sup> Sin will ruin a church if it is not removed from its members.

## Summary

The church has always relished the idea of being a representative for Christ in the world. But in the area of holding its members accountable and making sure that every part of the body of Christ was living a life that was honorable and representative of the name in which it is called, the church has been neglectful. The church has forfeited an area of representation, both to its members and to the world. It seems the church has been more comfortable condemning sin in the world, rather than within its own walls. While never pleasant the doctrine of discipline is necessary in a fallen world to make sure that the local church gathering displays Christ in all his fullness and glory. It has often been quoted, but Dagg correctly states, “When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.”<sup>41</sup> Not only does representation of Christ leave when discipline is not enforced, but also the idea of the presence of God in their midst is missed within the church. Perhaps the absence of his presence has led many to feel apathetic towards their local church gathering. Unfortunately, Fee is probably right: “Maybe the most significant thing we can learn from such a text is how far many of us are removed from a view of the church in which the dynamic of the Spirit was so real that exclusion could be a genuinely

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<sup>40</sup>Dale C. Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 305.

<sup>41</sup>Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 193.



redemptive action.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Biblical Leadership Holds the Church Together**

The final section in this chapter, and the final sermon in this project series outlines the biblical leadership structure that God has handed down for the local church. The previous five sermons and sections have discussed what the local church should be doing, and the only way that the church will stay focused on its purposes is if it has good biblical leadership in place. This section will examine one passage from the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Timothy 3:1-13. In this passage Paul lays out a clear plan for the future leadership of Timothy’s church, and for every other New Testament church that God will build. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus promises that he will build his church, and the leadership structure that will be responsible for that church is outlined in this section.

#### **Elders**

The first office listed by Paul is the office of elder, or overseer, or pastor; a number of Greek terms used at different times in areas of the New Testament all involve an office that appears to have oversight of the flock. Different denominations may prefer different translations just due to preference, but Allison lists various passages throughout the New Testament that show the differing titles are used “interchangeably.”<sup>43</sup> The key is not necessarily the title of the position, but rather the function of the office, and for the remainder of this section the title of elder will be used to refer to this office.

Undoubtedly, in the context of the letter of 1 Timothy, Paul lays out a

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<sup>42</sup>Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 214.

<sup>43</sup>Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 211.

leadership structure primarily to deal with the presence of false teaching within the church.<sup>44</sup> Johnson says, “This community seems to have had a genuine crisis in leadership,”<sup>45</sup> and in this crisis and vacuum of leadership Paul lays out the office of elder to keep the church lashed to correct doctrine. Therefore, the most foundational qualification for the elder is that he be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2). That an elder be “above reproach” (1 Tim 3:2) summarizes well his lifestyle and reputation, even stating that he be “well thought of” (1 Tim 3:7) by those outside of the church, but what sets the elder apart from deacons, and even other members of the church, is that he be able to teach. Allison extends the explanation by saying, “All elders must be able to teach as well as to refute those who contradict sound doctrine.”<sup>46</sup> The primary purpose of these elders was to make sure that the church was growing in sound doctrine by teaching well, but also that they would know the scriptures well enough to be able to contend with any false teachers. If the church is going to hear and respond, and be devoted to the teachings of God, then the church must have faithful men to teach and rebuke them.

Regarding the number of elders within a church, Dever writes, “The Bible clearly models a plurality of elders in each local church.”<sup>47</sup> Allison agrees: “Without exception, every time the New Testament mentions the government of a particular church, the leadership structure is a plurality of elders.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the most compelling

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<sup>44</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 473.

<sup>45</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 75.

<sup>46</sup>Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 219.

<sup>47</sup>Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 229.

<sup>48</sup>Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 293.

instance of a plurality of elders is when Paul and Barnabas had finished one of their missionary journey in Acts, and they returned through the cities and “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). Even in these new churches, the leadership was shared among a group of men. Every local church needs every qualified man who is willing to serve the church as an elder to be doing so. The body functions well only when all parts are using their God-given gifts for the common good of the church.

For some practical reasons, having more than one elder serving a local church is beneficial as well. Sometimes, when one man leads a local church, too much focus is placed on him, and he is seen as the head of the church, which is not biblical at all as “Christ is the head of the church” (Eph 5:23). This situation can be a downfall for the one elder, or for the entire church. Dever gives some other practical reasons for having more than one elder:

This means that many decisions involving the church yet not requiring the attention of all the members should fall not to the pastor alone but to the elders as a whole. While this is sometimes cumbersome, it has the immense benefits of rounding out the pastor’s gifts, making up for some of his deficiencies, supplementing his judgment, and creating congregational support for decisions, leaving leaders less exposed to unjust criticism.<sup>49</sup>

The best church leadership structure is one in which a group of qualified men assume the noble task of teaching and shepherding the flock. These men then use the best abilities and gifts of each man, relying on the strengths of one to compensate for the weaknesses of another, to ensure that the local church is achieving her role as the representative of Christ on earth.

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<sup>49</sup>Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 230-31.

## Deacons

While the office of elder is necessary to maintain sound doctrine within the church, it does not appear that the office of deacon is equally as necessary. Towner writes, “The office of deacons probably emerged as the church grew in size and the demands on the leadership required that certain functions be delegated.”<sup>50</sup> Marshall makes an excellent point regarding deacons when examining similar instructions given by Paul to Titus: “In Titus the need is to appoint elders who act as overseers and there is no specific mention of deacons; this does not exclude the possibility that they existed, but evidently there were churches which did not have them.”<sup>51</sup> Apparently, the role of deacons was supplemental to the work of the elders. Many commentators mention the occurrence in Acts 6:1-7 as an example of how deacons could supplement and take on work that allowed the elders to focus on teaching and shepherding the church. While this passage does not use the title of deacon for these men, it certainly fits the overall picture of how this office is to function within the church. Allison writes, “If the office of elder is dedicated to the work of teaching, leading, praying, and shepherding, then the diaconate is devoted to serving in all other areas of the church.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, while the deacons were not prevented from serving in the areas that are listed for elders, such as teaching, it appears that their primary role was to aid the elders in taking on tasks within the church that would have prevented the elders from being devoted to the ministry of oversight.

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<sup>50</sup>Philip Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994), 83.

<sup>51</sup>Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 520.

<sup>52</sup>Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 241.

## Summary

If a church is going to function well, it must be led well by qualified men. Those qualified men are referred to as elders (or whatever term is preferable) and there should be more than one in every local church, assuming multiple qualified men are willing to serve. Furthermore, when workload impedes the ability of the elders to exercise oversight there can be deacons selected to help minister to the church's needs. The church will always be under attack in this world both from within and from without. Faithful men must be willing to fight off the wolves from outside, and also the wolves within the church dressed in sheep's clothing. Marshall says, "Over against the dangers of heresy the church is closely associated with the gospel and is the guardian of the true message which leads to salvation...It requires that there be faithful people in the congregation who will teach it and take action against those who pervert it."<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusions

This chapter has sought to show from the Scriptures how the local church gathering should be a priority in the life of the believer. From gathering to hear and respond together to the word of God, to being present and involved to ensure that qualified biblical leaders are shepherding the church well, these six sections and texts were selected because when combined, they provide a good argument for every believer to be highly involved in a local church.

One overarching theme that comes from every text is the idea that the believer should always be following after Christ "together" with other people. None of the texts

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<sup>53</sup>Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 521.

mentioned in this chapter describe the believer in isolation. From Exodus where the people gather together to hear from the Lord and then respond to him through obedience, to even the final chapter on the group of men who should help lead the church together, one sees a pattern of togetherness that is too often missing in many Christians' lives. Perhaps the old evangelistic line that people "need to have a personal relationship with Christ" has contributed to the individualism that seems to permeate many believers' lives. The next chapter helps answer the question of why the church has lost priority in the lives of many Christians. This chapter has provided biblical evidence for the priority of the local church gathering, and it seems that through every text God simply wants his people gathering together.

Fee gives a fitting illustration when commenting on the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, when referring to the fact that the church is made up of many different people: "The need for diversity if there is to be a true body and not simply a monstrosity."<sup>54</sup> His idea of horror would be a church made up of all the same types of people, thus picturing a church that was just an ear, or an eye, for example. To carry that illustration further, would Fee's point mean that the individual Christian who is failing to connect with a local church is also a monstrosity? Individuals in themselves are not the body of Christ. They are simply an ear, or an eye, that if disconnected from the entire body looks more like a science experiment than the savior of the world. The distorted version that many people outside of the church have of Christ could possibly be related to the fact that they have never truly seen Christ through disconnected individual believers.

In conclusion, every text used in this chapter to explain the priority of the local

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<sup>54</sup>Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 583.

church in the life of the believer relates somehow to the truth that believers need to be connected together with other believers within a local church gathering, both for their own personal growth and development as a follower of Christ, and also for the sake of the witness of Christ to the world.

CHAPTER 3  
THEORETICAL SUPPORT FOR THE PRIORITY  
OF THE LOCAL CHURCH GATHERING

**Introduction**

Many reasons contribute to the decline in local church attendance. This chapter outlines not only the fact of declining church attendance, but also the various reasons suggested for this decline. The previous chapter intended to show the priority of the local church gathering from a biblical perspective, and how the local church is intended to be a source of encouragement and stability for the individual believer. This chapter explores the reasons why the local church is becoming less of a priority in the life of believers. The two primary areas that will be investigated are sociological and spiritual; seeking to determine the sociological and spiritual reasons for the decline of church priority and attendance.

**Declining Church Attendance**

Researchers agree that church attendance is at best maintaining its past levels, but is probably declining. As Wuthnow observes, there may be a debate to whether it is constant or falling, but “nobody claims that religious participation has been rising in recent decades.”<sup>1</sup> Since we know that church attendance is not rising, the question seems

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 51.



to be just how far has church attendance fallen?

Estimates of decline are sometimes overblown due to a preconceived notion that the United States began as a nation fully committed to the church, with the entire population present in a local church on each Sunday morning. Putnam rebuts this belief: “Although most often we think of the colonists as a deeply religious people, one systematic study of the history of religious observance in America estimates that the rate of formal religious adherence grew steadily from 17 percent in 1776 to 62 percent in 1980.”<sup>2</sup> Sheler quotes similar statistics in his article, but believed the number of Americans attending a church or synagogue to be closer to 68 percent as of his publication in 1994.<sup>3</sup> By these reports one would assume that churches have been booming ever since the colonists set foot in America, but there seems to be a significant difference between identifying oneself as a Christian and faithfully attending a local church. And in fact, there may be a disparity between actual and self-reported attendance.

Shattuck reports that while the typical pollster will report church attendance of 40 percent, he finds researchers that argue the number should be closer to 17.7 percent.<sup>4</sup> Editor in Chief at Gallup Frank Newport admits, “No matter how we ask the question to people, we get roughly 40 percent of Americans who present themselves as regular church attendees. He adds, however, that if you were to freeze the United States on any

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000), 65.

<sup>3</sup>Jeffrey Sheler, “Spiritual America,” *U.S. News & World Report*, Vol. 116, Issue 13, April 4, 1994, 49.

<sup>4</sup>Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” 2014, 1, accessed September 29, 2015, [www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles](http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles).

Sunday morning, you may find fewer than 40 percent of the country's adults actually in churches."<sup>5</sup> This over-reporting that is often suspected among pollsters is often referred to as a 'halo-effect.' Wuthnow writes, "People somehow want to be 'religious' badly enough to lie to pollsters about how often they attend."<sup>6</sup> Putnam suspects that over reporting of church attendance may be as high as 50 percent, and if that is the case, then the decline has been seriously miscalculated.<sup>7</sup> Decline in attendance may be underestimated through over reporting, but percentages are also misleading because they fail to account for population growth.

Some researchers point to statistics that show church attendance has only declined from 20.4 percent in 1990 to 17.7 percent in 2004, a small but perhaps not significant decline, but they fail to take into account a U.S. population growth of approximately 18 percent, or 48 million people.<sup>8</sup> When population growth is factored in, it is evident that church attendance is on a steep decline. Not only are fewer people attending church than ever before, but there are few churches that are actually growing. Shattuck quotes Thom Rainer who cites a 2002 survey where he believes only 6 percent of U.S. churches are growing, when growth is defined by churches that are increasing in attendance at a rate higher than the community's growth rate.<sup>9</sup> If his stats are correct then a staggering 94 percent of churches are in recession. Part of this recession is explained

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<sup>5</sup>Shattuck, "7 Startling Facts," 2.

<sup>6</sup>Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 51.

<sup>7</sup>Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 71.

<sup>8</sup>Shattuck, "7 Startling Facts," 2.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 3.

by the fact that fewer and fewer Americans are even self-identifying as Christians anymore.

The Pew Research Center reports, “Between 2007 and 2014, the Christian share of the population fell from 78.4 percent to 70.6 percent.”<sup>10</sup> Taking into account population growth, that is a net decline of about 5 million less people who have not only stopped attending church, but are no longer self-reporting themselves as Christian.<sup>11</sup> In Wuthnow’s research which is focused on adults 21 to 45 years old, he finds a decline in church attendance among these young adults of only 6 percent since 1970, but when calculated that equals almost 6.3 million fewer church attenders.<sup>12</sup> There are millions of people not only leaving the church, but also leaving the faith entirely.

This significant decrease has led some sociologists to question the impact the church will have on society going forward. Murray identifies faith as a pillar of American community, but sadly admits that the decline in church attendance from the 1970s to the 2000s, “leaves the religious core not as a substantial minority that is still large enough to be a major force in the community, but as a one-out-of-eight group of people who are increasingly seen as oddballs.”<sup>13</sup> This view of church attenders now as “oddballs” contributes to Rainer’s conclusion that one of the key reasons churches are declining is that the “cultural Christians,” those who had a need to simply be identified

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<sup>10</sup>“America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, 2, accessed October 1, 2015, [www.pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>12</sup>Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 53.

<sup>13</sup>Charles Murray, *Coming Apart* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012), 212.

with a church in their community, are no longer attending church.<sup>14</sup>

There is little doubt that the priority of the local church among believers is decreasing, but the local church's significance within society is also declining. If cultural Christians are leaving the church, then one might suppose that the local church is getting stronger with a more committed base, but that does not appear to be the case. There appears to be a steeper decline in church attendance than the drop in those who self-report as Christians. While both groups are declining, the remainder of this paper will seek to answer the question of why the church is faring worse than the faith, by examining sociological and spiritual reasons for the decline in church attendance.

### **Reasons for Declining Church Attendance**

Church attendance has been on a steady decline for years and there are a number of possibilities to explain this phenomenon. This section will examine the potential factors that are contributing to the church's decline by examining the issue from two perspectives. The first perspective will be from a sociological standpoint. A possible explanation for the decline in church attendance could simply be due to the different society within which the church is currently functioning. The second perspective is from a spiritual and religious standpoint, seeking to determine whether the church alone is responsible for its own decline. This chapter will then close with a brief section offering some conclusions regarding both research perspectives.

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<sup>14</sup>Thom Rainer, "Seven Key Reasons Your Church Attendance May Be Declining," July 1, 2015, 2, accessed September 29, 2015, [www.thomrainer.com](http://www.thomrainer.com).

## **Sociological Reasons for Decline**

The sociological reasons and explanations for the decline in church attendance are numerous. Douthat provides a good sentence of summation when he writes, “The rootlessness of life in a globalizing world, the widespread skepticism about all institutions and authorities, the religious relativism that makes every man a God unto himself—these forces have clearly weakened the traditional Christian churches.”<sup>15</sup> While different researchers use varying terms the general ideas that he mentions do point to the primary areas from which most sociologists believe the damage to the church has been done. The world today is not one that necessarily contributes to regular local church attendance.

**A different world.** Most researchers agree that the world in which the church exists today is substantially different than it has been ever before, and this change has created generational differences. Putnam writes, “Any given cohort of Americans seems not to have reduced religious observance over the years, but more recent generations are less observant than their parents.”<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, this generational difference just seems to continue for the following generation, with each one becoming just a little less religious than the one before. A number of cultural differences have helped contribute to this generational pattern.

Wuthnow writes that oftentimes declines in church attendance are attributed to church leaders, but he says larger changes are happening in society and that these

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<sup>15</sup>Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 279.

<sup>16</sup>Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 72.

changes “affect religious participation because they involve the life worlds in which younger adults live.”<sup>17</sup> The first area of change within the worlds of younger adults today is in regard to marriage. He states that many younger adults are choosing to marry later in life, or to not marry at all, and therefore since the largest demographic of people that attend churches are married couples, this change will have a significant impact on local churches.<sup>18</sup> This change in marital habits has a trickle-down effect that causes further issues for the local church.

A resulting change within today’s society that is closely related to marriage is the presence of children within families. He points out that the more children a couple has, the more likely they are to be attending church regularly.<sup>19</sup> Wuthnow surmises, “In short, the group in which religious attendance was least common became larger (single adults), while the group in which it was most common (married with children) became smaller.”<sup>20</sup> A society with an ever increasing single adult population, leads to a society with fewer married couples. And now, in a society with even fewer married couples those couples are choosing to have fewer children than previous generations, or no children at all. And with fewer marriages occurring, and fewer children to raise, another cultural consequence is impacting the local church.

More and more young women enter the workforce today than ever before. Wuthnow deducts that “religious participation may be decreasing, therefore, simply

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<sup>17</sup>Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 54.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 54, 56.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 58.

because more women are working full time and have less time to devote to religion.”<sup>21</sup> He concludes that whether or not someone is married has a “stronger effect on church attendance than anything else,” and that “when only women are considered, working full time does reduce the likelihood of attending regularly.”<sup>22</sup> The generational changes of people waiting to get married, choosing never to marry, and women working full time have all contributed to the decline in church attendance, and the decision to not marry or waiting longer to get married seems to cause the trickle-down effects of fewer children and more women working full-time. The world indeed is changing, and there are further changes that are not conducive to church attendance.

Closely related to this change in young adults marrying and starting families is research that points to the varying changes and disruptions that today’s society is creating. Smith in his research has found that “religious faith and practice generally associate with settled lives and tend to be disrupted by social, institutional, and geographical transitions.”<sup>23</sup> One of the disruptions that is experienced more in our culture today is the frequent mobility of most adults; when people move residences they are less likely to be involved at a local church than people who have never moved.<sup>24</sup> Simply put, there are more disruptions in life situations today than there have been before, and people are not overcoming these distractions. Smith writes that for those who do stay involved in a local church through the disruptions, they have a view of religion

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<sup>21</sup>Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 58.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>23</sup>Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 75.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

“that trumps the demands of the rest of life, a commitment around which the competing needs of school, work, and play are adjusted, rather than vice versa.”<sup>25</sup> However, this viewpoint is in the minority, and many adults are simply not willing to fight to make attending a local church a priority.

This inability to prioritize the church over other areas of life has led to the decline in church attendance, and society is not providing any assistance to those with this struggle. Smith had written in an earlier publication of the struggle for teenagers when religion has a “largely marginal social structural position.”<sup>26</sup> The culture in which the church finds itself today is one of increasing ‘busyness’ and one where there no longer remains a prioritized position for the local church.

The world has been successful in pushing the church out of priority in the life of a believer, and the church has allowed itself to be pushed out of position. No doubt in today’s world the church no longer has a default position of priority that previous generations experienced. Today’s world is one in which there are fewer traditional families, and a population that is highly mobile, and thus often loosely associated with its local culture. All of these sociological factors have led to the decline in attendance at local churches.

**The individualization of faith.** While a changing landscape in which the church exists has harmed its chances of growth, there is perhaps no greater damage done to the local church than the privatized or individualized view of Christianity. Roof and

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<sup>25</sup>Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 78.

<sup>26</sup>Christian Smith, *Soul Searching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 263.



McKinney write that, “Commitment to self has grown at the expense of the community, disrupting especially loyalties to traditional religious institutions.”<sup>27</sup> As individualism and personal fulfillment became the rallying cry of the modern era, the need to have “strong supportive attachments to believing communities” diminished, and this era of individualism is creating new expressions of faith.<sup>28</sup>

Wuthnow describes the new phenomenon regarding religious participation this way: “It is being replaced by more private expressions of faith–belief without belonging, as some writers describe it.”<sup>29</sup> This privatization of faith allows people to still claim to be associated with Christianity, but yet be conspicuously absent from any congregation. Hammond notes, “It is not that Protestant America has disappeared, then, but that religious individualism is triumphing over collective religious values of any stripe.”<sup>30</sup> This new expression of personalized faith has caused the local church to be pushed even further back on the list of priorities.

Individualism has caused an identity change amongst Christians. Hammond discusses two kinds of identity, primary and secondary, noting that a primary identity is “reasonably permanent and unavoidable,” whereas a secondary identity can be “put on and taken off as circumstances change.”<sup>31</sup> He argues that in the past identification with your church was a primary identity, but now it seems that personal choice and

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<sup>27</sup>Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 33.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>29</sup>Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 51.

<sup>30</sup>Phillip Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 177.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 173.

individualism has shifted religion to a secondary station. When a person's identity as a Christian is completely personal, there is no longer a need to have a church attachment to express or maintain that identity. This change from primary to secondary has been devastating to the priority of the local church in the life of an individual believer, because it has created the ability to identify personally as a Christian without church affiliation. Some believe there is still church affiliation among most believers, but that fewer are joining one specific local church.

Putnam believes people are still attending churches, just sporadically and without firm commitments: "Privatized religion may be morally compelling and psychically fulfilling, but it embodies less social capital. More people are 'surfing' from congregation to congregation more frequently, so that while they may still be 'religious,' they are less committed to a particular community of believers."<sup>32</sup> Therefore measuring one local church's attendance may no longer be as helpful, as their attenders might choose to go to other churches randomly on any given Sunday.

This privatization or individualization of faith could be a problem that the church allowed to grow without correction especially through weak membership commitments. A failure to have expectations of members is another key reason that Rainer identifies for churches that have declining attendance.<sup>33</sup> Churches may have stopped having rigid memberships because the increasingly secular society preferred freedom over commitment, but the freedom that secularism promises is not always beneficial.

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<sup>32</sup>Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 74.

<sup>33</sup>Rainer, "Seven Key Reasons Your Church Attendance May Be Declining," 2.

Individualism in a society is a byproduct of secularism, and as secularism brought freedom for the individual in many areas, it also resulted in isolation. Nisbet writes, “The modern release of the individual from traditional ties of class, religion, and kinship has made him free; but, on the testimony of innumerable works in our age, this freedom is accompanied not by the sense of creative release but by the sense of disenchantment and alienation.”<sup>34</sup> As secularism grows in modern societies people do experience freedom, and therefore perhaps do not see the need to be ‘tied down’ to one specific church through membership, but their freedom is also breeding isolationism. In fact, their freedom blinds their ability to see how isolated they’ve become, and someone who believes in and values their freedom would see no need for membership, and the constraints that might follow, and they would also become leery of any institution that was seeking their membership and commitment.

The progression in secular societies of increasing freedoms thus leads to growing distrust toward any institutions, whether it be religious traditions or even governments. This mistrust toward institutions has been damaging to the individual. Nisbet believes that the emphasis upon the individual, has crushed his communal attachments.<sup>35</sup> He goes on to write about the cost of individualism: “Man’s alienation from man must lead in time to man’s alienation from God.”<sup>36</sup> Secularism has long been attacked as the movement that removes God from progressive cultures, but it appears that individualism, and its promises of freedom, is the greatest threat to the local church.

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<sup>34</sup>Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 10.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

Secular ideas might not promote church attendance within a society, but the damage has already been done when a secularized individual sees no need for any type of relational commitments in his free and autonomous, but sadly, often alienated world.

The individualization of faith is so damaging to the church because it falsely claims to maintain an attachment to God when there is no attachment to fellow man. The church by definition is “one body with many members” (1 Cor 12). Secularism has in effect taught a hand that he is in fact an entire body, and that he has no need for an arm, or any other body part. Therefore the society has for decades been teaching rugged individualism, and the church has not fought back against this unbiblical teaching. Perhaps the church never realized that the greatest threat a secular society posed was the isolation it created for its members who were supposed to be living the Christian life together. The resulting decline in church attendance even among people who claim to be Christians can thus be understood, when those Christians choose to live lives isolated from their local church.

Society has some responsibility for this trend, but the church is culpable for failing to teach the corporal nature of Christianity. Nisbet points out that following the Protestant Reformation, church teachings began to minimize corporality: “Out of this atomization of religious corporatism emerges the new man of God, intent upon salvation through unassisted faith and unmediated personal effort.”<sup>37</sup> The following section of this chapter will examine the spiritual, rather than sociological, reasons for the decline in the priority of the local church, and as Nisbet suggested above, the church itself could be primarily responsible for her own decline.

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<sup>37</sup>Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 90.

## **Spiritual Reasons for Decline**

This section will examine the spiritual or religious reasons for the decline of the priority of the local church in the life of a believer. Culture can certainly be responsible for downturns in religious sentiment, but the church has existed for thousands of years in virtually every type of situation and every location on the earth. To attribute steady decline simply to society would be foolish. The church itself must bear some responsibility for the situation in which it finds itself. Carroll has written that perhaps the baby boomer generation had a “famous distrust of institutions” due to secularism, but the next generation had refuted the previous one’s desire for “feel-good theology.”<sup>38</sup> Cultures change, and often change quickly, and the church’s approach must adjust as well. With the continuing decline in attendance the church must quickly find answers and find ways to reverse this trend, and perhaps the best way to change course would be to examine what the church has been doing during the previous generations.

**The church promoted individualism.** Nisbet noted the effect of individualism on people’s faith, and even wrote the poignant line, “Man’s alienation from man must lead in time to man’s alienation from God.”<sup>39</sup> What was more disheartening than this secularistic trend, however, is his analysis that the church itself, especially Protestantism, had been contributing to this mindset the entire time. He writes, “For an increasing number of human beings, after the sixteenth century, the corporate Church ceases to be the sole avenue of approach to God...Out of this atomization of religious

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<sup>38</sup>Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), 60.

<sup>39</sup>Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 14.

corporatism emerges the new man of God, intent upon salvation through unassisted faith and unmediated personal effort.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the position of the church being the “sole” or only way of approaching God needed correction, but the church is certainly a primary way in which people connect with God. When the Protestant Reformation began to rebel against the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, people’s view of the church as a needed institution was also damaged. After this point, the personalization of faith led to an individualization of the faith that minimized the position of the local church.

Truly, a man will someday stand alone before God, and his salvation will be dependent upon his own faith, apart from his standing within the church. The Reformation emphasis upon grace and faith alone certainly taught this truth, but within the Reformers’ correct emphasis upon the individual soul and personal salvation, the aspect of the church coming together as the body of Christ and Christians gathering to encourage one another in their journey of faith was inadvertently injured. This was indeed an unintended consequence, and it is not as if the Roman Catholic Church was exceling in this area prior to the Reformation, but the injury was done none the less. Nisbet quotes literary historian Edward Dowden and his evaluation of the Christian classic *Pilgrim’s Progress* as a perfect example of this focus on individualism to which the church contributed:

All that is best and most characteristic in Bunyan proceeds from that inward drama in which the actors were three—God, Satan, and solitary human soul...institutions, Churches, ordinances, rites, ceremonies, could help him little or not at all. The journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City must be undertaken on a special summons by each for himself alone.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 90.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 93.

While I would agree that rites and ceremonies could help the Christian pilgrim in only small ways, the belief that pilgrim should have to make his journey completely alone belies Scripture and the mutual encouragement that was earlier pointed to in Hebrews 10, and the truth of the one body with many members from 1 Corinthians 12. However, in fairness to Bunyan, he was alone when he penned this Christian classic. He was imprisoned by the institutional church in his area because they had deemed his local assembly illegal. Perhaps he never saw the individual pilgrim journeying alone as the ideal path of faith, but at the time, it was the journey that many of his fellow brethren found themselves upon. It is never best to describe the Christian's journey of faith as one made in isolation, but when one of the all-time best selling Christian books fails to mention the positive benefits of the local church in one's journey of faith it is hard to argue with the supposition that the church itself has contributed in some form or fashion, and often unintentionally, to this concept of individualism.

Nisbet continues to point out further unintended consequences of the reformation: "During the Protestant Reformation, as we have seen, much of the emphasis upon the church visible was transferred to the church invisible."<sup>42</sup> This truth may also shed some light on people's commitment to their own local church. If the invisible church, of which every believer is certainly a part, is what matters most, then local church attendance is no longer a priority, but simply an option. The invisible church has trumped the visible, which leads to Christians being invisible on Sunday mornings at their local churches. Nisbet makes his point with strength: "The drive toward individualism and the attack upon corporatism remains the most luminous aspect of the

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<sup>42</sup>Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 243.

religious revolution that began in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.”<sup>43</sup> This progression toward individualism is even more clearly seen in today’s American churches.

The individualism that the American Christian espouses today has been engrained within them for centuries now. Smith’s conclusions from examining the faith of young adults, who were taught by older adults, shows what our individualistic theology has produced:

It is the centuries-old, central evangelical insistence on the ultimate consequence of each individual’s salvation in standing alone before a holy God that emerging adults are resonating when they articulate their radically individualistic view of religious faith and practice. Each individual stands alone in matters of faith, ultimately unaffected by and not accountable to any other human.<sup>44</sup>

The emphasis upon individual faith and salvation has produced a generation that no longer sees a need for their local church. If their faith is ultimately self-determinative, then local church attendance and participation is unnecessary.

These attacks on corporatism appear to be an unintended consequence of the Protestant Reformation that trickled down even to current American congregations. No doubt that individualism was pushed upon Christians as they were encouraged to take ownership and responsibility for their own faith, but they were never encouraged to separate from the church. Even Luther was saddened by his removal from the church. He desired to reform the Catholic Church, not be separated from it, but his and other Reformers’ railings against the Roman Catholic Church laid the groundwork for undervaluing the very thing their work reestablished—the local church. Wuthnow writes,

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<sup>43</sup>Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 94.

<sup>44</sup>Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 290.



“We are becoming less theologically and institutionally grounded and more inclined toward making up our own faiths as we go along.”<sup>45</sup> The fact that Christians are becoming less theologically grounded and creating their own faiths is the emphasis in the next section, and unfortunately Christians were never taught the priority of the local church.

**The church failed to educate its members.** While that sentence may sound overly simplistic, it was a conclusion that Christian Smith made from one of the largest surveys of teenage religious habits ever conducted. He writes,

For very many U.S. teens, religion is important but not a priority, valued but not much invested in, praised but not very describable. Our distinct impression is that very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating their youth.<sup>46</sup>

While the study focused on the religious habits of teenagers it actually provides a very good example of the religious habits of adults as well. Smith writes that the conversations they had with teenagers revealed that “in most cases teenage religion and spirituality in the United States are much better understood as largely reflecting the world of adult religion, especially parental religion, and are in strong continuity with it.”<sup>47</sup> So his statement above reflecting the fact that congregations had done a poor job of educating their teens could also be read, “congregations have done a poor job of educating their adults.” One of Smith’s most revealing conclusions was this: “Parents and other adults, as we have suggested, most likely ‘will get what they are.’”<sup>48</sup> If

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<sup>45</sup>Sheler, “Spiritual America,” 2.

<sup>46</sup>Smith, *Soul Searching*, 262.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 261.

teenagers have a faith that is not in line with traditional Christian teachings, the safe assumption is that they were taught that religion, rather than coming up with it on their own. Teenagers are simply a reflection of the previous generation, and what they reflect is that the church has failed to teach the traditional doctrines of the faith.

Research shows that teenagers have indeed learned something from church, but it just does not happen to conform to historic biblical teachings. Smith writes,

The language, and therefore experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward.<sup>49</sup>

In their follow up four years later to their initial research, Smith found this same type of language being used regarding religion: “The best thing about religion is that it helps people to be good, to make good choices, to behave well.”<sup>50</sup> This was the sentiment of the now emerging adults they researched. For many people being a Christian has been simplified into ‘being nice.’

Smith said this fundamental change in the definition of the faith has contributed significantly to the desire of young adults to attend church, because once they’ve learned the simple lesson of what it means to be ‘good’ they no longer see the need to continue attending.<sup>51</sup> The church’s role has been minimized to simply teaching the rules of good and bad behavior, and once you know those rules, you can graduate from church and continue on your individual journey of faith. This change in description of what it means to be a Christian is a symptom of teaching an entirely different religious

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<sup>49</sup>Smith, *Soul Searching*, 171.

<sup>50</sup>Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 286.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

system. Smith believes the teenagers are articulating a new system of faith: “Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.”<sup>52</sup> Neither of those options is good for the future of the church, but due to the overwhelmingly similar response from most of the respondents to Smith’s surveys it seems best to believe that Christianity is being colonized into something completely new.

Smith saw such a consistent faith being described by teenagers from all over the country that he even gave this new religion a name: “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”<sup>53</sup> He concludes that “it may be the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalist society.”<sup>54</sup>

Piecing together his description of this new religion, its basic tenets could be described as: a God who exists and watches over people, that wants people to be nice to each other, but wants one to be happy, will only get involved in one’s life when one needs him to, and that lets all good people go to heaven.<sup>55</sup> When the church is relegated to a place that only teaches people how to be nice to one another, then it has failed to perform its God given responsibilities, and has ceased to function as the church. Furthermore, when the church does not have much to teach or offer to people, it ceases to be needed, and no longer holds a position of prominence even among believers, and if the doctrines of the church are as simple as “being nice to one another” then one no longer needs to have the

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<sup>52</sup>Smith, *Soul Searching*, 171.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 162, 163.

church hold authority over them, instructing and teaching them how to interpret and follow the Scriptures.

The culture of individualism not only attacked the position and prominence of the local church, but it also attacked the authority of the church. In the Protestant Reformation the authority of the church was challenged, and rightfully so, but it seems that over the next several hundred years the protestant church never regained the symbol of authority when it came to interpreting Scripture that the Roman Catholic Church once had. All authority to interpret the Bible and define the Christian life lies within the individual, a natural consequence of the emphasis upon the individual soul. Smith found this truth during his research: “Right theology no longer needed to be preached by the seminary-educated pastor. All persons could simply read, understand, decide, and know the biblical truth for themselves.”<sup>56</sup> Through the emphasis upon the faith of the individual believer, the church unwittingly chipped away at one of its primary reasons for existence, namely to help guide and encourage the believer. The sheep no longer had a need for the shepherd.

The role of a pastor or elder was not needed to help guide the individual on their journey of faith, because as Smith found, “Final authority has decisively shifted from the Bible to the individual reader.”<sup>57</sup> Individualism has helped erode the authority, and therefore one of the roles, of the local church in the life of the believer. If the church no longer has authority when it comes to teaching, then believers are finding little use for their local church. If only simple doctrines are being taught, and the individual has more

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<sup>56</sup>Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 291.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

authority to interpret than even his elders, then it's no wonder believers see no need for the local church.

**The church contributed to its own decline.** This failure to teach all of the doctrines of Scripture and hold people accountable to those teachings has led many people to abandon the church, and look for other means of spiritual guidance. The thought seems to be that as the church has tried to embrace the culture, they failed at confronting the culture when needed. Pullman writes in her article about how some people had replaced church with working out at a gym: "In their emaciated understanding, religion has gone from 'comprehensive explanatory system for the cosmos and its ultimate meaning' to 'my take on the latest Packers game'....If CrossFit or a rock concert can give people the same thing they can get in your church, you're doing church wrong."<sup>58</sup> Carroll writes, "Young believers cling to the hard gospel and holy mysteries that, they believe, make those struggles worthwhile. And they gravitate to churches that help them reverence the intimate yet mysterious God to whom they have surrendered their imaginations, and their very lives."<sup>59</sup> The church, in avoiding the controversial and divisive, had actually lost what made the church transcendent in the first place.

The church cannot shy away from teaching the full doctrines of Scripture, and must move beyond simply teaching the niceness that Smith found so pervasive in his research. Douthat explains it well when referring to the church removing a few of the

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<sup>58</sup>Joy Pullman, "CrossFit Can Never Replace Church," *The Federalist*, December 2, 2015, 2, 5, accessed December 7, 2015, [www.thefederalist.com](http://www.thefederalist.com).

<sup>59</sup>Carroll, *The New Faithful*, 86.

difficult doctrines from its teachings: “It seems easy enough to snip a single thread out of this pattern, but often the whole thing swiftly unravels once you do.”<sup>60</sup> As the church’s priority in the culture certainly seems to be unraveling it seems the church has contributed to it by failing to teach every doctrine.

In regard to the church’s responsibility for its own demise, no one has perhaps written more often and pointedly than Kinnaman and Lyons. They have each written individually, as well as collaboratively with such titles as *You Lost Me* and *Unchristian*. They point the finger solely at the local church as the one responsible for the decline in attendance. Their reasoning for what the church has done wrong is manifold, but there seem to be a few recurring themes in their research. Lyons writes about the church needing to “recover the gospel.”<sup>61</sup> For him this means the church returning to a “restoration” view of the gospel, arguing that the gospel is “the central resolution to humanity’s age-old questions and self-conflict” and that this needs to be the “new, old way of serving Jesus.”<sup>62</sup>

Kinnaman writes that the church must become a place in which honest debate can occur, believing that “young Christians believe that the churches in which they were raised are not safe and hospitable places to express doubts.”<sup>63</sup> He also believes that this new approach by the church is not new at all, but rather a return to “historic and traditional practices, and orthodox and wisdom-laden ways of believing, are what the

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<sup>60</sup>Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 288.

<sup>61</sup>Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 192.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 192, 202.

<sup>63</sup>David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 11.

next generation really needs.”<sup>64</sup>

Both Kinnaman and Lyons argue in their joint work *Unchristian* that the church has failed to display Jesus to the culture properly, which is why most people are leaving the local church. They say the way in which the church can display Jesus properly is by “relationships and friendships...and cultivating a deep concern and sensitivity to outsiders.”<sup>65</sup> In their words, “this is what Jesus did.”<sup>66</sup> The genesis of their research is that somehow the church got distracted from the true teachings and practices of Jesus, and that a simple examination of Jesus’ habits and practices will right the ship. However, their research and reasoning seems to contradict what Smith and his observers found.

While Kinnaman and Lyons believe the church has “lost” its way and therefore people are leaving or refusing to attend, Smith found that the majority of American teenagers were “happy simply to accept the one religion in which they were raised.”<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, most of the teenagers they surveyed “feel relatively positive about the general environment of their congregation,” and that “nearly eight in ten attending U.S. teens say that they expect to attend the same congregation they are currently involved with when they are 25 years old.”<sup>68</sup> Smith goes so far as to refer to Kinnaman and Lyons personally and state that his research “provides a corrective to some alarmist and (we

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<sup>64</sup>Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 202.

<sup>65</sup>David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 208 and 212.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>67</sup>Smith, *Soul Searching*, 260.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 61 and 70.

think) inaccurate views on these matters by some authors who stress the deep-seated alienation of most emerging adults from mainstream American religion, particularly Christianity.”<sup>69</sup>

It appears that both researchers, while disagreeing, are exactly right.

Kinnaman and Lyons see people as alienated from the church because the church is failing to teach traditional Biblical doctrines, while Smith sees people as not angry with the church, but with poor doctrinal foundations. People should indeed be angry with their churches when they fail to teach sound doctrine, but many people are perfectly fine with the low impact, feel good teaching that is pervasive at many local churches. They are not angry or alienated from their churches, they just simply don't have much need for the church, since its teachings are so basic. In either case the church is responsible for its lost members by failing to teach them the full doctrines of Scripture.

### **Conclusions**

The local church is suffering a decline in priority. This chapter has examined sociological as well as spiritual reasons for that decline. In conclusion it seems best to point out what appear to be the strongest forces at work against the priority of the local church, and some ways in which the church can address these destructive forces.

The sociological circumstances in which the church finds itself today are not necessarily as conducive to church attendance or growth as they were even a century ago. As Smith was quoted earlier, the church no longer maintains a natural priority in society. However, the greatest threat to the local church in an ever increasing secular society is

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<sup>69</sup>Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 324.



the growing presence of individualism or privatization. As society becomes more secular it becomes more isolated. People are increasingly not gathering to do anything. I will admit that it is much easier to watch my favorite sports team from the comfort of my own couch than it is to load up and attend in person, but by choosing comfort and convenience I forfeit the experience of cheering on my team in an environment inundated with personal interaction, and regardless of technological advances nothing can replace being at an event in person.

The church must realize that people today are choosing individualism over community on many levels. The Christian is never commanded or encouraged to make his journey of faith alone, but many are resolved to do just that. The church must combat this individualistic approach to everything that permeates today's society. As far as biblical ammunition the church must proclaim the "one body" passages of Scripture like 1 Corinthians 12. The church must constantly remind their members that while they will stand alone before God someday in judgment, they are never meant to travel alone on this earth until that time. The church must continue to emphasize passages like Hebrews 10 that command Christians to "stir one another up to love and good works." Heavy emphasis should be made on the togetherness of Christians throughout Scripture, such as Acts 2, in order to combat the isolationist and individualistic tendencies of today's society. Perhaps what was most concerning regarding Nisbet's evaluations of the society were that his words were published in the 1950s; the church is behind and must work hard to rebut these individualistic tendencies.

Individualism also seems to be the primary spiritual force at work against the priority of the local church. The church must proclaim and emphasize its authority and

responsibility in the lives of believers. Individualism will teach them that all authority lies within themselves, whereas Scripture, such as passages like 1 Timothy 3, will teach them that authority lies within the leaders of the church. Scripture teaches that at times individuals will make the wrong decisions and the wrong interpretations of Scripture, and that it is the responsibility of the entire church to pray for them, correct them, and then remove them if they refuse to repent. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 18 highlight these confrontational yet necessary situations. The individual will err, but with the help of the church every believer can stay on the straight and narrow path that leads to eternal life. Individualism places all authority upon the individual, but provides no safety net when the individual enters into error.

The decline of the church is not inevitable. God has promised that he will build his church, and there is nothing in Scripture that implies there will be a time when construction ceases. However, the church does have a responsibility to build according to the plans laid out in Scripture, and those plans are effective for any and every situation in which the church exists today. The sociological environment in which the American church finds itself today is one of ever increasing individualism, but Scripture has numerous remedies, and the church must be faithful to preach and promote these passages that counter the individualism that has become so prevalent. Individualism is pervasive and destructive to the church God has designed, both sociologically and spiritually, so the church must consistently proclaim the corporal truths of Scripture and constantly remind believers that God intended for them to make this journey together.

## CHAPTER 4

### DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

#### **Weeks 1-3: Distributing the Surveys**

The first three weeks of this project involved retrieving information from the congregation by asking them to complete surveys. Giving advance notice of the coming surveys, and what they would be used for was helpful. It was important to mention to them that the same surveys would be used both before and after the sermon series. Make this completely clear and repeat it often, because it will help when the time comes to redistribute the surveys. Making clear that I would compare their pre-series and post-series answers also helped participants understand why there is an identification marker used by the surveys; any marker can be used, but I felt the last four digits of their Social Security number would be the easiest. Only one survey lacked this identifying marker, so most people were not frightened by giving this personal identifier, but in hindsight, perhaps the last four digits of their telephone number would have been less intrusive. By my mentioning the purpose of the identification field, which is to be able to measure responses after the sermon series, most people's concerns about divulging any type of personal information were alleviated. The last four numbers of their Social Security number is also a marker that provides significant anonymity, more than say a birthdate, which is helpful since I wanted church members to answer the survey honestly, not in the way they thought their pastor would want them to answer. I pastor a small congregation,

and it would not be hard at all to determine which survey belonged to which person with a birthdate attached. The best approach is just to find an identifier that is not intrusive, but also protects the responder's anonymity.

On the first Sunday that surveys were available, I found it helpful to hold them up and show them to the congregation, letting them know that the forms would be available in the back of the sanctuary as they left. I printed the surveys on the front and back in order to save paper and to make them seem less daunting, but I made sure to hold them up so that people could see there were questions on both the front and back. I did receive a few surveys that only had one side completed, thus making them ineligible for comparison. Reminding participants that they had three weeks to complete the surveys let everyone know they could simply take one when they had left, and then bring it back the following Sunday. I also had surveys available on Wednesday nights during our prayer and Bible study time, and a few members who had missed the previous Sunday took them on that first Wednesday.

### **Weeks 4-6: Analyzing the Data**

The size of the church determined the amount of time it took to enter the completed surveys into a format where I could measure their responses. I chose to enter the surveys into an Excel spreadsheet and use a numerical score for responses on a scale of 1-6: 1 being a "Strongly Disagree" response up to a 6 being a "Strongly Agree" response. Once every respondent's answers were entered, I was able to begin analyzing the data to see the church's current mindset toward the local church. It was helpful to take the time to examine participants' answers, and identify the places where the congregation is the most "off" when it comes to their understanding of the local church.

This information was helpful as I approached the sermon series. Not that one sermon is any more important than the others, but knowing ahead of time where my congregation struggles the most was helpful during my time of preparation. It also helped me decide which sermons I would like to build upon with follow-up lessons on Wednesday nights.

### **Weeks 7-12: Preaching the Series**

The preaching series lasted for six weeks. The sermon texts were selected according to their relevance in regard to the priority of the local church gathering together. The “together” aspect of the series was highlighted in each sermon’s title. The series began in the Old Testament, before the appearance of the local church, to show the habit and preference that God has for speaking to his people in a gathered setting. The sermons then progressed through the New Testament, beginning with an emphasis on the closeness of the local church community, and then concluding with two sermons regarding the leadership structure of the local church. The final two sermons focused on the need for a biblical leadership structure in order to preserve and maintain the unity and witness of the local church.

Sermon briefs are included in the appendix of this paper, and my intentions and thoughts regarding the presentation of each sermon are included in this current section. However, the information is included primarily as a basis to understand my initial intent for this project, as well as how I saw the texts coming together to formulate this series. While the outline and structure of the sermons is sound and hopefully helpful, someone wishing to duplicate this project is encouraged to make each of the sermon’s their own. The briefs included in the appendix simply include my main points which formulated my purpose for each sermon; they are the bones, so to speak, of each sermon,

but they are missing the flesh. Each preacher is welcome to examine the bones of my exegesis, and examine how and why I was emphasizing each point when I was preaching the sermons to my congregation, but each preacher should study the texts for himself and allow the Spirit to guide him in his presentation of the texts for his specific congregation. Therefore, the structure for how this project was conducted is included in this paper and someone could easily take up this project and use it as his local church, but the preacher will still need to perform his own exegesis and give each sermon his own specific touch in order for it to be most effective in his congregation. Therefore, the following information regarding the presentation of each sermon should indeed be helpful, but it is not exhaustive.

### **Gathered Together at Mt. Sinai**

This initial sermon in the series provided a crucial foundation for the rest of the project. The fact that God requests his people to be gathered at Mt. Sinai lends credence to the New Testament emphasis upon his people continuing to gather together. There are other gatherings of God's people in the Old Testament, but the passages in Exodus 19 and 24 provide a clear foundation for his people gathering to hear from him, respond to him, and then be identified as his people.

This progression of hearing and then responding began to permeate through our gatherings after this sermon. At the conclusion of this sermon I could see my people's reaction and affirmation, especially to the words in Exodus 19:8, "All the people answered together and said, 'All that the Lord has said, we will do.'" This became a rallying cry for our people. In fact, we concluded the service that morning with me saying, "All that the Lord has said," and the people responding with, "We will do." They

saw through this passage a template for approaching worship each and every Sunday morning. Many had certainly felt the necessity to arrive on a Sunday morning and listen to the word of God (although some may have needed the reminder to ‘hear’), but few had considered the strong need that God’s people have to respond to the word of God. In fact, for the remainder of the sermon series and still to this day I now reach the conclusion of my sermon and phrase it many times in regards to how we as a people, together and individually need to respond to the sermon text. The necessity of response was incredibly helpful for the people of our church. And when church attendance is not only a time to “hear” from the Lord, but also a time to “respond” to him, the necessity for their presence in worship is heightened.

Many people fall into the habit of viewing a worship service as a time to sing songs they already know, and often hear sermons from passages they are extremely familiar with. With that approach they can more easily begin to rationalize their way out of attending worship on a Sunday morning. But when the aspect of togetherness and responding are factored in to worship, then their presence is always needed, and our response is always fresh and new. Emphasizing the necessity of response was enlightening to our people, and helpful in them gaining a greater understanding of their need to be present at the Sunday morning worship service.

The final emphasis from this foundational sermon dealt with identity. The sermon makes the natural argument that after responding to the Lord, the people begin to identify more fully as his people. This idea is also foundational for the rest of the sermon series, because it now ties our obedience to God’s word as the primary identifier as to whether or not we are truly believers. Preaching this sermon effectively means

emphasizing the three sections of hearing, responding, and identifying as God's people. This triad provides a great foundation going forward through the remainder of the series.

### **The Early Church Devoted Together**

This initial sermon from the New Testament was also foundational to the sermon series. While "together" is a key word throughout the series, this is the first sermon that describes what being "together" looked like in a New Testament setting. The key aspect to this passage, and to this sermon, is the emphasis on devotion. The three main points to this sermon are the fact that the early church was devoted to the apostles' teaching, devoted to their fellowship, and devoted to their prayers. This aspect of "devotion" must be the emphasis of this sermon. As the sermons flow together, Acts 2:42-47 answers the question of what the church "does" together. In Exodus they have gathered together to hear and respond to the Lord, and in Acts 2 the focus of the church's devotion becomes clear. Too often people are not clear on what the church should be doing, and this sermon seeks to answer that question.

The church should be actively devoted to the teachings of Scripture. The early church was gathering every day to listen to the apostles. The emphasis for the church today should be a devotion to the Scriptures that gives them exposure to the Scripture. They need to be reading the word daily, consuming the word of God just like they need to consume meals. Devoted to the word of God just means a constant exposure, and there are a number of ways in which a pastor can apply this to his congregation based on the number of influences available through modern media. Devotion is determined by time of exposure, and also by willingness to respond. A constant exposure to Scripture is only beneficial if the exposure leads to obedience. Do not stress exposure without response, as



both are needed in order to meet the definition of devotion seen in the early church.

The early church was also devoted to one another. This aspect of fellowship should be the primary emphasis from the passage. There are a number of exegetical considerations regarding this area, especially in relation to what aspect the Lord's Supper was involved. This point should only be considered briefly during the sermon, as the primary emphasis should be on their devotion to "one another." Any type of illustrations and examples that reinforce their unity in fellowship should be used appropriately. A better use of time regarding fellowship would be to emphasize the fact that they were selling possessions to provide for the needs of others within the church. This is a much better explanation of the fellowship that was going on within their congregation, and also ties in nicely with the overall point of the sermon which involves the devotion of the church. The church must be devoted to one another, even if that means suffering the loss of something to provide for the needs of another member.

The final aspect of devotion mentioned in Acts 2 is in relation to their prayers. This final point might be an excellent way of describing how the church can be devoted together, as prayer is a warm and intimate way of communicating with one another. It's hard not to be devoted to the needs of a brother or sister for whom you pray continually. And prayer becomes an effective way of responding to the teachings of Scripture, as the church prays together to respond with obedience to the message from the Lord. All three areas point to where the early church was devoted, and where today's churches can find the type of community and fellowship exhibited through the example of the early church in Acts 2.

## **The Blood that Brings Us Together**

The next passage in the sermon series, Hebrews 10:19-25, might be the most famous passage for encouraging the local church to gather together. The simple reminder to “not neglect the gathering together of ourselves, as is the habit of some” has been used by pastors ever since the words were penned to incite the church into assembling together. This is a strong encouragement, and should be enforced during the sermon, but the contextual reasoning of the author for gathering together has more to do with the blood of Jesus, than the benefits of community.

The primary purpose of the writer of Hebrews is to point out how the blood of Jesus and the priesthood he embodies is greater than any of the Old Testament covenant aspects of sacrifice and worship. The blood of Jesus “speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:24). The believer is able to enter into the heavenly throne room because the blood of Jesus gives him confidence to do so. This aspect of Jesus’ blood, and what it achieves, is the basis for all of the encouragements of gathering together that occur in Hebrews 10, and therefore needs to be a regular emphasis throughout the sermon.

Due to the blood of Jesus, the church is encouraged to draw near to God through faith, hold fast to their common hope, and stir one another up to love and good works. All of these occur when one places a high value and priority on the blood of Jesus and what it has achieved for them. No one would dare enter the earthly Holy of Holies without proper authorization, so how much more fearful should one be to enter into the actual presence of God in heaven? Great is the cry of Isaiah, “woe is me!” and should be echoed by every human still today, *unless* you have been washed in the blood of Jesus

through faith. Our hope is only as strong as the object in which we have placed our hope; the blood of Jesus is worth holding onto. Moreover, the final command to stir one another up occurs because oftentimes the natural progression is for people to begin distancing themselves from the congregation.

For a number of reasons, a person might begin to disconnect from a local congregation, so it would be difficult to address every person's issues in one sermon. However, chapter 3 of this project gives some great insights into the culture in which every church member exists today, and that is a culture that fosters and promotes individualism. This sermon, and its emphasis to "not" neglect meeting together is a great time to begin introducing some of the cultural habits of many people; habits which do not promote gathering together. The rise of individualism is counter to everything we see in Scripture regarding the local church, so it is no wonder that the enemy would use this weapon against it. Making people aware of their natural tendencies to disassociate, and operate on a more individual level, is helpful as an illustration and application at this point in the series. The information in chapter 3 is good to keep in mind throughout the sermon series, and should be interjected as often as the preacher feels it is needed. The culture of individualism is one of the primary targets of this series in order to create a higher priority for the local church in the life of every believer, and the blood of Jesus in Hebrews 10 is a strong deterrent against this cultural tide.

Overall, when people begin to devalue the blood of Jesus, they will devalue the time of gathering with other believers. Do not make the mistake of preaching community from Hebrews 10 and all of its benefits, without making the case that the blood of Jesus is the primary reason we gather together. The blood of Jesus is the

strongest motivator for the believer to continue gathering with other believers. The blood of Jesus is the one thing that every believer in every congregation on the planet holds in common, and the blood of Jesus is what every hope of every believer is built on. When a believer places a high value on the blood of Jesus, they will have a high value on continuing to gather together with other believers. When people fail to attend a time of worship that celebrates Jesus, it means that they have lost their esteem for his blood and sacrifice. Remind them of what his blood has achieved, and they will remember to be in attendance the next week.

### **The Spirit that Brings Us Together**

This sermon might have been the most impactful of the series as far as encouraging people to be a committed part of their local church. All of the sermons were helpful, each in their own way, but this metaphor of the human body, from 1 Corinthians 12, which represents the local church makes clear to people their role and responsibility as a member of a local church. However, before emphasizing their individual roles, and before they begin to ponder what ‘part’ of the body they are, it is important to make clear to them that the Holy Spirit is the one that gives them a common gift, and that they each have the Spirit in exactly the proper proportion in which God the Father designed.

It is the same Spirit that fills each individual believer in each local church. Every member has a different role and function within the church, and those roles manifest themselves in different ways. In fact, sometimes it may even be difficult to see the role that some members play, but they have the same Spirit as the most prominent member of the church. It is important to emphasize this same Spirit aspect before getting to their individual roles so that no one feels their role or gift is inferior. To say to the

church, “The gift, or gifts, that you have, have been given to you *specifically* by God himself,” carries great power in the life of a believer. They feel the special nature of both having and receiving the Holy Spirit. It is as if they can see God the Father hand wrapping a gift, and then handing it specifically to them. They need to feel this distinction in regards to their gift before moving on to how they are to perform their role as a member of the body of the local church.

Once they know they are special and unique, and that God has gifted them through his design and plan, it is safe to move to the metaphor of the body. At this point they can now picture how everyone in the church is joined together. The human body is such a great metaphor, and even a child can understand how the body has different parts and yet they all work together as one body. When they see the entire body together they can realize how their one function can help the entire body, and at this point they can understand clearly how their gifts are meant for the common good of the entire church. They can understand how hard it would be for the church to function if it was missing an arm, or a leg, or an eye, or an ear. Each part has such a specific function and their presence is such a blessing to the entire church. At this point, it is easy to maneuver to the final point of the sermon, which is their need for one another.

Every part of the human body is needed. Church members need to hear that they are needed. The metaphor of the body helps the church not only see how they are all in this together, but also how helpless the body would be if it were missing a part. If an ear was missing repeatedly on Sunday mornings, there is nothing that a nose or an eye could do about it; neither a nose nor an eye has the gift of hearing. When a church member is missing, the body is handicapped. Through this metaphor of the body the

church is able to see and feel their need for one another. Every church needs every member in order for them to achieve their God given purposes. This need for one another is one of the ways in which the church can breed supernatural unity and love. This metaphor of the body is powerful for people, and they leave pondering their role in the local church.

It was helpful to follow this sermon up with some discussion of spiritual gifts on the following Wednesday night. The emphasis of the sermon from 1 Corinthians 12 in this series is certainly on the unity that the Spirit brings, but it was also helpful to discuss with my people what gifts they believe the Spirit has given them, and how they can begin using those gifts for the common good of the church. As people left our service the Sunday morning I preached this sermon they were joking with one another, wondering which body part they represented. This sermon caused them to ponder those types of questions, so it was helpful to follow up with some type of discussion of spiritual gifts.

### **Discipline Holds the Church Together**

The final two sermons in this series provided a different aspect of the priority of the local church. Each of the previous sermons have sought to provide a biblical picture of ‘why’ believers should be gathering together, but these final two sermons focused more on ‘how’ believers maintain good gatherings. As the first sermon in the series emphasized the practice of gathering to hear and respond to the word of the Lord, this sermon dealt with what to do when members fail to respond with obedience.

The reason church discipline is needed is because there will occasionally be members of the church who fall into sin, and refuse to repent. The first sermon emphasized that when the people of God hear and respond to him, they then begin to

have an identity as his people through their obedience. However, if there is an unwillingness to obey his commands, they forfeit that identity. Church discipline is the means through which the church can maintain its identity as the people of God. Referring back to the sermon in Exodus at the start of this sermon was helpful because “identity” is what the church is trying to maintain through discipline. Some see discipline as a spiteful and unloving act, but when overall identity is trying to be maintained it takes the personal side out of the equation.

The process for approaching a member who has fallen into sin is clearly outlined in Matthew 18. It starts with a very personal, one on one, discussion. Discipline only escalates to a public matter when several private interventions have failed. It only becomes public when many private conversations have occurred. The goal is always that repentance will occur during these private moments, but when the private attempts fail, the matter must become public, and the entire church must agree together that the behavior being exhibited by the sinning member is not a good representation of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

A good example of what type of public sin is being referenced comes from 1 Corinthians 5. This passage is used as an illustration in the sermon, with the primary practice of how discipline should occur coming from Matthew 18. In 1 Corinthians 5 you have a member committing a sin that even the pagan Roman culture condemns. This is an obvious reason for their removal from the congregation, but only after they have been confronted privately and have refused several opportunities to repent. The question regarding church discipline is always in regard to which sins is the church going to publicly excommunicate people for, and 1 Corinthians 5 is helpful as an example because

it occurs in Scripture, and it's an overtly sinful behavior. These are the type of sins that usually end up in public discipline because they are public sins that the entire community is aware of. Public discipline is always a last resort, and that should be emphasized in the sermon, but the reasons for removal are strong and necessary.

The church must not only remove members who have fallen into sin for the sake of the identity of the church within the community, but they must also remove members in order to protect others in the church from falling into the same type of sins. Sin can spread like cancer, or like yeast as Paul states. Both examples are of corruption and death spreading throughout its host. By choosing to confront and remove sin from within its own ranks the church takes the stance that they realize sin ruins and destroys lives. Amputation of a body part would never be desired or pleasant, but at times, it is needed in order to protect the body. This is what is happening during corrective church discipline. It is a process in which you protect the Christian identity of the local church.

### **Biblical Leadership Holds the Church Together**

If corrective church discipline is the practice of amputation in order to protect the integrity and witness of the local church, then a church's leaders are the ones holding the scalpel. Good leadership is a necessity in order to hold a church together. This final sermon in the series helped the church to examine its own organization in order to make sure that the local church stays a priority in the life of a believer. Paul gave Timothy specific instructions on the organizational structure of the church in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, and this sermon seeks to help the church understand the roles and functions of the two primary offices of leadership: elders and deacons.



A distinction in offices signals that there is a distinction in roles, much like the sermon in 1 Corinthians 12 emphasized the different roles of each member, so it is not surprising that there would be distinctive roles within the leadership of the church. This distinction in offices is what was most important for my local church, because as a typical Southern Baptist church in the south our church only had the office of deacon. I say we only had one office, because in honesty, the church had always viewed the pastorate as a completely separate office within the church, although most of our people after hearing the sermon realized that the office of pastor was synonymous with elder, even though they had never used the title of elder before. To be honest, most of our people had a very Roman Catholic view of the church, seeing the pastor as a priest, and very distinct from the rest of the congregation. In my situation there was not only a strong need to separate the two offices, but to also make sure that the pastor fit into a category in which the rest of the church could also be included.

The need for a distinction in offices is tied to the distinction in gifts within the congregation. After hearing the role and function of the elder most members realize that their pastor performs these duties. Shepherding and teaching are roles that just about every church member will normally associate with their pastor. What was counter cultural in our setting was the idea that there could also be members of our church who functioned in this role. It is my position theologically that there is typically a plurality of elders mentioned in the New Testament. While our church is small, and adding other staff members is not really a possibility, the church did begin to realize that they see other men in the congregation as performing this role of a shepherd. In fact, many of them look to these men when the church is without a pastor. By teaching on the distinctions

between elders and deacons, many began to see that there were ‘elders’ currently serving our church as deacons.

The office of deacon is esteemed in our church and consists only of men, but by preaching through 1 Timothy 3:1-13 people began to see the distinction in roles, and began to realize that deacons are primarily servants, and if they don’t have the pseudo authority of elders, that women serve the church as well just without the title. By preaching on the distinction in roles within church leadership I was actually able to preach on church unity, because everyone begins to see what roles they can play in helping lead and serve the church. Preaching this topic also breeds greater commitment, and thus leads to more faithful attendance, causing the priority of the local church in the life of a believer to increase.

Before preaching this sermon it is helpful to evaluate the current leadership structure, and determine what type of structure will be the goal going forward. After preaching this sermon I told the church of my desire to see us transition to a plural elder model, where those men within the congregation who are seen as shepherds would begin to serve with and help counsel me in leading our church. Some members were immediately on board with the transition and saw it as biblical. Others saw the biblical model, but wondered if the transition was necessary since we had functioned with only a pastor and deacons for so many years prior. This sermon will engender those types of questions so the preacher should be prepared as to how he would like to proceed. I chose to keep discussing the issue of elders for several Wednesday nights following this final sermon, which also helped us to keep thinking about the local church during the last few weeks of the project as the surveys were being completed again. The most difficult part

about transitioning to a plural elder model is not necessarily convincing people that it's biblical, but rather forging a way to nominating and selecting elders. Basically, there might be some men who have served as deacons for many years, and who would like to be 'bumped up' to the office of elder, but the church does not wholeheartedly agree. It is just best to take a hard look at the current leadership structure before preaching this sermon and evaluate the path going forward, because the questions will come.

### **Weeks 13-15: Redistributing the Surveys**

The final three weeks of the project involved redistributing the initial surveys and then analyzing the data to see if the sermon series was able to make a statistical difference regarding the participants' thinking and feelings towards the local church. It is important to make clear at the start of the project, that they will take the surveys twice, both at the beginning and ending of the sermon series. I don't know the best way to make this clear, but I do know that for the first week of redistributing surveys I had some members tell me that they had filled out a survey a few weeks ago. Making clear to them that I'm hoping the sermon series will change the way they think about the local church is crucial to helping get completed surveys back from them.

Also, it is difficult to keep participants mindful of the surveys after the sermon series has ended. Keeping reminders in the bulletin, during announcements both at the beginning and ending of the Sunday morning service, as well as having surveys available for people to take on Wednesday nights were all helpful in making sure I got as many surveys back as possible. But again, it is much harder to get a second survey back. The best motivation I found for my people was telling them that I was going to completely change their way of thinking about the local church with my sermon series. People seem

to respond to this type of challenge, and almost want you to fail as if it was a competition! However, the series is long enough that even the most stubborn of members cannot remember how they answered the survey six weeks prior, so even when they are competitive the results are not skewed.

To give an example of the difficulty in getting completed surveys, I will share my experience with my small local congregation that averages around 60 in attendance each week. With the first distribution of surveys before the series started I received 38 surveys back from the congregation. Of those 38 only 35 were eligible to be retested because one respondent did not include the last four digits of their social, one respondent only completed the front page of the survey, and one survey only had the back completed! With the second distribution after the series I also received 38 surveys back from the congregation. However, with this group only 20 could be matched up against their initial survey results. There were actually 9 new responders in this second group, but again, almost 18 from the first distribution that didn't complete a second survey. Part of this could be attributed to them not realizing they needed to fill the surveys out twice, but unfortunately, and as this project addresses, there were many "regular" attenders who were not present at church in either of these three week spans.

Once I received the second survey back from the congregation, I was able to enter the results into the spreadsheet I created when I first distributed surveys and compared the initial survey with the second one to determine if any statistical differences were made in how the congregation views the church. The statistical model for examining these surveys is referred to as a T Test for Dependent Samples. That's a very mathematical term for a way of determining the differences between the average scores

from both surveys. The simplest way for seeing the difference between scores is to enter the information into an excel spreadsheet and then calculate the difference between scores. I assigned a value of “1” for “Strongly Disagree” responses, and “6” for “Strongly Agree.” I then began adding the scores from the two surveys and taking the average of both the pre-series survey and post-series survey. The difference between pre-series average score and post-series average score gives a good idea as to where the most impact was made during the sermon series.

In my pool of 20 surveys there was one question that showed the greatest impact from the sermon series. It was question seven from the survey: “My lack of attendance at my local church on a Sunday morning only affects me negatively, not the entire congregation.” In the pre-series surveys my congregation had an average score of 3.4, which meant they all “somewhat disagreed.” It is good that they all believed that statement was somewhat false, and that they saw the benefit of their attendance relating to the entire body, but in the post-series survey their answers decreased by an entire point, to an average of 2.4, which meant they had progressed from “somewhat disagree” to “disagree.” Ideally it would have been great to see a two-point swing to the “strongly disagree” category, but the improvement from one category to the other was the greatest swing amongst all the questions for my congregation, and showed that there was definitely some improvement in their view of the corporal church, and the necessity of their attendance for the benefit of the entire body.

The second greatest change in average answers for my pool of respondents was in relation to question 10: “It is the duty of a Christian to attend Sunday morning worship services each week.” This question, in relation to all the others, was perhaps the most

questioned by my congregation. A few did not like the term “duty,” but I intentionally chose a strong word in order to get their feelings toward their weekly attendance. This question saw the average score increase from 4.45, “Somewhat Agree” to 5.1, a firm “Agree.” Part of the intent of the sermon series was for them to see the necessity of attendance, primarily from the sermons related to the corporal nature of the church. If the church is a body, then it is absurdity to believe that there is no expectation or requirement for the different members of the body to be present on Sunday morning. Christians have a responsibility both to their Lord and to one another to be present for Sunday morning worship services.

### **Conclusions**

This chapter is meant to assist the pastor who picks up this project and decides to preach through the sermons contained within, and also to survey his congregation both before and after the series. The results will probably be different from congregation to congregation, but hopefully this project is a tool to help a pastor impress upon his people their need for the local church. The sociological information from chapter 3 shows how today’s society is increasing the focus upon self, which contradicts the biblical expectations for Christians in this life. The church must fight against the tidal wave of individualism with clear teaching from Scripture about the necessity of the local church in the life of a believer. This project is a helpful weapon in this fight, but the principles from the theological section are ones that cannot be preached once and then set aside, but rather referenced repeatedly, until the local church regains the priority God always intended for it to have in the life of the believer.

## CHAPTER 5

### PROJECT EVALUATION

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this final chapter is to provide a brief evaluation of this project. The evaluation begins by examining the project's purpose and goals to determine whether they were achieved. Then the project's strengths and weaknesses are analyzed. After determining these, a brief section on what I might have done differently to better achieve the project's goals is provided. The final section of this evaluation, and the project, reflects on what I have learned through this project, focusing not only on theological lessons, but also personal ones, regarding the priority of the local church in the life of the believer. While the information in the previous chapters of this project has been thorough, and beneficial to anyone who picks up this project in the future, this chapter critiques and improves upon the previous information, and provides the reader with the best possible perspective before undertaking their own version of this project.

#### **Purpose and Goals**

The purpose of the project was outlined in the first section of chapter 1: To develop a preaching series on the priority of the local church gathering. This purpose was clearly achieved, and the resulting six-week sermon series is contained in both chapter 2 as well as through the appendixes of this project. This purpose was also achieved when the series was preached to the members of O'Brien Baptist Church in

O'Brien, Texas (OBC). This purpose may have been overly simplified, as much more than just a sermon series was created and achieved through this project, but that was the ultimate purpose of the project when it was first conceived. The resulting goals help describe the other achievements of this project, all of which relate to the purpose of developing the sermon series.

The first goal of the project was to determine where the church ranked as a priority within the lives of the members of OBC before the series was preached. A survey was created and distributed that measured the priority of the local church in the life of the believer in order to create a baseline for measuring the success of the project in raising the priority of the local church in the life of the believer. The survey was effective in providing insight into how believers viewed the church, but the stated goal of surveying 30 church members was not technically met.

The number 30 was chosen as it represented approximately 50 percent of OBC's average attendance for Sunday morning worship. I say that this goal was not "technically" met because the goal was to have 30 surveys that could be measured at the conclusion of the series. In fact, 47 total people were surveyed. However, only 20 people completed full surveys both before and after the sermon series. By "full" surveys, I mean that they answered every question as well as providing an identity marker in order for the comparison to be made between pre and post survey results. Possible reasons this goal was not fully achieved are discussed later.

The second goal of the project was to develop the preaching series on the local church. This goal was achieved when the series was preached, but it was also accomplished through the selection and organization of the texts to be used for the



sermons. I was very pleased with not only the texts that eventually became part of the sermon series, but also how these texts worked together and built upon one another as the series progressed. From the series starting in Exodus and concluding with the biblical leadership structure for the church in 1 Timothy 3, the series covered many areas of ecclesiology.

I was also pleased with the results of my research for the theoretical chapter of this project, and how those results can help sharpen the preacher's thinking about his members' mindset toward the local church. While chapter 3 is simply a support for the theological chapter, I felt its results were critical to improving the sermon series. The level of individualism that exists in most secular societies today is the backdrop against which this series was preached, and this information will hopefully be an asset to any preacher who picks up this project in the future. It would not be wise to try and preach the series from chapter 2 without incorporating the information from chapter 3 as it adds to the theological section nicely.

No six-week series on the local church could be exhaustive, but I was very satisfied that the areas of devotion and unity were emphasized, and also that the series was able to incorporate church discipline and church leadership, and how these two areas are critical to maintaining the identity of the local church as the people of God. Overall, I was just very pleased with how the series came together, and the survey results after the series supported the belief that the priority of the local church increased after believers listened to the sermons.

The final goal of the project was to preach the series on the priority of the local church, and to measure its effectiveness by redistributing the initial surveys and

comparing the respondents' answers. This goal was met both through the completion of the series, but also in the collection and evaluation of surveys. There was not a positive statistical difference regarding every question on the surveys, but there was some definite progress made on a few of the questions. The most dramatic difference noted in my research was in regards to the corporate nature of the church. The question from the survey read, "My lack of attendance at my local church on a Sunday morning only affects me negatively, not the entire congregation." The respondents' average answer went from a "Somewhat Disagree" on the pre-series survey to a "Disagree" on the post-series survey. Just this small change was enough for me to believe that the sermons had impacted our congregation. There were also changes in other average answers, and the surveys could be improved upon, which I will discuss in the coming section. Not every purpose and goal was met completely, but overall, the project's ultimate purpose to present a sermon series that increased the priority of the local church in the life of the believer was certainly achieved.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

One of the main strengths of this project was its theological content. I was very pleased in how the series came about and fit together as it progressed, but I was also very pleased with the passages that were covered through the series. An exhaustive sermon series on ecclesiology would probably be longer than six weeks, and include additional passages to the ones that were covered by this project. However, an exhaustive series on ecclesiology would include the texts used in this series. The passages selected fit together and built a solid foundation regarding the priority of the local church in the life of a believer, and the theological issues covered by these texts are

ones that are crucial for a biblical understanding of the church. While this is not a series I would preach entirely every few years at my church, it would be safe and helpful to cover one of the texts each year just to further reinforce the ideas presented about the local church. Theological content was a significant source of strength for this project, but the sociological material was just as strong.

The information included in chapter 3 of this project was critical for understanding the priority of the local church in the life of a believer today. The theoretical chapter of this project provided crucial information that every pastor needs in order to understand the individualistic tendencies that are engulfing our culture. Parents and especially grandparents are made ill by the attention that young people give to personal handheld devices in every social setting, but few adults have realized just how individualized they have become as well. I currently live in a small community, but even now I know the negative thoughts that come into my mind every time my doorbell rings. Society is becoming increasingly more private, and decreasing in community in both small and large population centers. This individualization and privatization of life must be recognized by the pastor, and the information in chapter 3 of this project is an asset in understanding the culture in which the local church finds itself today. In fact, the information in this theoretical chapter is so crucial that it leads to a weakness of this project.

One weakness of this project is that its primary purpose was to present a sermon series, and that type of setting is not an ideal place to present the theoretical information contained in this project. A sermon series needs to be based on topics in Scripture, or be a series through a specific section of Scripture. And the information in

chapter 3 is merely for illustrative purposes when the series' focus is on the priority of the local church. Perhaps a series on biblical community might be a more appropriate context for sharing the majority of the information in chapter 3. My point is that there is more to the priority of the local church than simply the elements of society that are attacking our desire for community, and thus attacking our desire to be involved with local churches, but that is just one aspect of local church attendance. While the information in chapter 3 was helpful when discussing the corporal nature of the church, it wasn't incredibly helpful when preaching about church discipline and church leadership. Therefore, a weakness of this project was that its structure wasn't conducive to attacking the individualization of society during each week of the six-week series. The information in chapter 3 is simply too helpful to not be used, but the only way to properly address its concerns would have been to create a new project and new series on biblical community or some related topic.

Another area of weakness with this project was in regard to the surveys. This area was helpful, as there were several good questions, and it was easy to see progress in the local church becoming more of a priority in the lives of our people, but overall the survey process, and the surveys themselves could have been improved.

Difficulty arose in both getting surveys completed properly, and also getting the second round of surveys completed after the project had ended. I did not end up with the 50 percent sample I was hoping for after the project had ended, and that problem could have been resolved with some tweaks to the surveys. I will share those specific changes in the section in which I outline things I would do differently, but unfortunately,

the surveys were more of a weakness for this project rather than a strength.

Another weakness of this project was simply the length of the sermon series. I do not know what the appropriate timeframe should be for any topical series, but after completing this six-week series and comparing the second surveys against the first, it just became painfully obvious that it would take longer than six weeks to completely transform people's thinking regarding the local church. Progress was made, feelings toward the church did improve, and our people especially saw their need to be present on any given Sunday, but I still feel that many of our members saw little change in their perception of the local church. We have not seen a surge in average attendance within our congregation. I did notice that during the series, and especially after the sermon from 1 Corinthians 12 in the fourth week, that when a few of our people were going to be absent the coming Sunday, they texted me and let me know that they regretted they were going to have to be gone, and that the "body" would be missing a part that Sunday. Those texts were encouraging, and they did show that progress was being made, but it still did not feel like enough.

A series that lasted an entire year might have the opposite effect on church attendance than the pastor intended, but even then it seems like it might be too little to bring about the change needed in many members' lives regarding the priority of the local church. A weakness of this project could be the length, but the principles of this project are ones that just need to be repeatedly emphasized on an ongoing basis. Perhaps the weakness of this project is simply tied to the weakness that all sermon series have; they aren't a magic bullet. No one sermon can reverse years of bad habits and hang-ups all in one single shot. I'll admit my intention in creating this project was to build that bullet,

but that is simply impossible.

### **Things I Would Do Differently**

I have mentioned earlier that I was very pleased with how this project turned out overall, but some areas could be improved. As I look back on the project and examine the varying areas, I am convinced that one part I would change would be in regard to the surveys.

The surveys were created over a two-year timespan. When I first began this project, I was serving as a college minister at a megachurch. I had previously worked with youth and college, and I saw firsthand the migration out of the church by students once they graduated from high school. As I began my doctoral studies, this aspect of college students and their hit-and-miss church attendance was at the forefront of my mind.

College students were the target audience when I first started drafting the initial surveys. However, when I got to the stage to begin implementing my project, I was no longer in a college setting. In fact, I was perhaps as far from that situation as possible as God had moved my wife and me to a small rural church where I now pastor, and the closest college was over seventy miles away. I went from serving all college students, to a situation in which we had college visitors every other month or so when they were home for a holiday or the weekend. This change in setting required a change in the surveys as well, but I still wanted to focus my project on the priority of the local church. The project had simply expanded from a focus on college students to now an entire church, but the emphasis was still the same: try to understand if congregants consider the local church to be a priority in their lives.

I share these changes in ministry settings to simply point out that the survey questions changed often throughout the course of this project, and if I had it to do all over again, I would change the surveys again. The hardest part about the initial survey was deciding which questions to ask. As I changed ministry settings it was not that the questions all changed, it seemed as if I was simply adding more questions to the survey. The difficulty was culling the questions down to fit on one sheet of paper, both front and back, and that process was hard because I had so many questions regarding the local church that I wanted answered. If I were creating a survey today it would be one piece of paper, with only questions on one side.

One reason for this change is due to the fact that I had a difficult time getting surveys completed accurately. The first time I distributed the surveys I did have a few people who only filled out one side of the survey, so I would make sure that the surveys were only one sided in the future. Also, by forcing myself to make the surveys only one sided I would force myself to ask only the most important questions.

The surveys used for this project had fifteen questions. That is not a cumbersome format by any means, except for the flipping of the page, but I feel like I could get the information I wanted from fewer questions. However, getting the survey on one side would mean probably cutting the total number of questions in half. The required seminary disclaimer takes up about a fourth of the page, and that information has to stay, but in order to free up space I would remove the age group identification as I did not find that information helpful at all when comparing their scores. My oldest group reported the smallest change in perception, but that information did not seem too pertinent, and the space would be better utilized if it was used for another survey question.

Going forward, I would make several changes to the survey used for this project. It can be better, and one way of making it better would be to fit everything on one page, and only ask the most important questions. That would be a difficult process, as obviously the first time I tried it, I was able to whittle the questions down to only fifteen, but the fewer the better. Changing the format of the survey might also provide some additional room, but making the survey concise provides the opportunity for a better response, and also perhaps an easier way of identifying the most specific areas of progress that the project was able to make.

My thinking was that the more questions I ask the more information I can compile and the greater my understanding of the church's current mindset toward the local church would be. But more questions also brings a cloudiness to the results. There is a chance that people get tired while answering, but more importantly, the more information you request from them the more variables you get for interpretation. Simpler is usually better, and fewer questions would have provided more direct, and specific information.

Also, one less significant matter I would change is to make the identifier on the surveys to the last four digits of their cellular phone, rather than the last four digits of their Social Security number. I do not believe requesting this personal information led to a reduction in the number of surveys I received back. I did receive one survey back both times that did not have the identifying information on the form, so that one person obviously did not want to provide the information, and I also had one respondent who used the number "1234" both times, and I assume that this is not the last four digits of his or her actual Social Security number; so I do not know if requesting this information hurt



my chances of receiving surveys back, but the last four digits of their cell phone would have been a less intrusive means. However, the drawback to asking for this information is that the responder knows I could in effect figure out which person belonged to which survey. I personally would not care, nor go to those lengths to try and match them up, but it could adversely affect their willingness to respond truthfully if they believed that their survey would not remain anonymous.

These changes are all small and are all related to the research portion of this project, so overall the project is very stable in its current condition. However, any future researcher might feel it is better to pick the questions from the survey that he finds most compelling and go with fewer than the fifteen that were initially included in my research. I am pleased that I find little to change with the actual sermon series when looking back.

### **Theological Reflections**

I approached this project thinking my theological insight into the local church was pretty thorough and accurate, but I learned even more as I began preparing, even from the Old Testament. The sermon from Exodus really added to my understanding of the corporate nature of the church. When God speaks and the people respond with “one voice” and “answer him together” I was able to see even from the Old Testament the unity and one body nature of the people of God. That sermon was probably one of the most impactful and memorable for our people, and today it still impacts my sermon prep as my conclusion is always designed around the way our people need to respond to the text each Sunday morning. We have ceased repeating, “All that the Lord has said, we will do,” at the conclusion of the service, but I can not help thinking that this would not be a bad way to end every one of our services. This sermon from Exodus provided a

tremendous insight into the corporate nature of the people of God from an unexpected place, and it laid a great foundation of “togetherness” for the rest of the sermon series, but the sermons from more traditional local church passages were also impactful.

The passage from Hebrews 10:19-25 is probably one of the most often used texts when preachers are wanting to address the topic of the priority of the local church. Its phrase encouraging the church to “not neglect meeting together” is one of the clearest reminders that Christians need the local church gathering. However, in studying this passage I realized that it is not necessarily a reminder to gather for the sake of community, but rather a reminder to gather for the sake of the blood of Jesus, and remembering and honoring what his blood achieved for them in salvation. Today there is a strong emphasis on community, and our need for it, and this is good and our culture certainly needs the reminder, but the encouragement to “not neglect meeting together” is in the context of remembering that the blood of Jesus has granted us access to God himself. The blood of Jesus is the greatest reminder for the people of God to gather together. This was something that I had never noticed from Hebrews 10 until I began to study the passage for this project. I had probably just used the text in the past, and its previous phrase of “stirring one another up to love” and just assumed that the reminder to “not neglect meeting together” was probably from our need for community, but our greatest need as a church is to continue valuing the blood of Jesus as life’s most precious commodity. We continue to gather together to remind ourselves of all that the blood of Jesus has done for us, and this is how our faith and hope hold fast without wavering.

A final theological reflection had more to do with church history than biblical interpretation, and it related to the Reformation. This is obviously a crucial time in

church history, and an area which I had studied often throughout seminary, and also my own personal reading. However, while researching reasons why the local church had lost some of its influence, I came across a book written in the 1950s about community-Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community*. As a sociologist, he stated the hypothesis that the Reformation had actually helped reduce the priority of the local church, and that its protest against the Roman Catholic Church caused the corporate church to lose significance in man's approach to God. This was certainly an unintended consequence of the Reformation, and was perhaps not as devastating to the future of Protestant churches as a sociologist might observe, but the Protestant emphasis on having a personal relationship with God has not contributed to people's need for the local church. In Protestant life we have made such an appeal for the individual soul to be reconciled to God that we have forgotten to articulate to that soul their need to connect with a local body of Christ. It seems that by emphasizing a very good thing, which was the individual's need to be saved, we have unintentionally neglected their need to be a part of a local body of believers. This insight helped me recover a more whole and complete approach to nurturing disciples, and helped me remind my people of the priority of the local church in the life of every believer. These theological insights increased my understanding of the priority of the local church, but I also found that the different circumstances in which this project was started and completed also helped to develop my personal views of the priority of the local church. The forces at work against the local church are truly arrayed against every demographic represented within the local church.

### **Personal Reflections**

When I entered the Doctor of Ministry program at Southern Seminary, I came

primarily with the desire to study ecclesiology. Before entering this program, I had searched for degrees in ecclesiology, and unfortunately, there were not many available. I found just one PhD program offered in Europe. When I found the Applied Theology tract at Southern, I thought this was the best possible option to continue studying the local church. I entered the program due to a love for the local church, and therefore I built my final doctoral project around a love for the local church. I wanted to develop a project that made the local church a priority in the life of every believer, and hopefully I have contributed toward that goal in some small way. This project actually spanned over my time at two very distinct local churches.

I began writing this project while I was a college minister at a megachurch with around 5,000 members, and around 2,300 in attendance on any given Sunday. I finish this project as the pastor of a small, rural church, with about 150 in membership and around 60 in attendance on any given Sunday. However, the principles in this project apply to both churches, even though they are about the two most different and distinct churches one could find. I love that about this project. When I was a college minister I was concerned about college students not joining and committing to a local church, and as a rural pastor I have the same concerns regarding the adults in my congregation. The struggles for large churches and small churches are much the same, just on very different scales.

Individualism is a major issue for college students today who have grown up in a technological world that actually prohibits personal interaction. It is hard for one to talk to people when their eyes are constantly glued to a screen that fits in the palm of their hand, not to mention the difficulty of interacting with others when one has earbuds in

listening to music around the clock. However, the adults that sit in my pews are just as individualized as today's college students. They come to church each Sunday, sit in the same place, and then head back home, close the door behind them, and stay in their own individual kingdoms the remainder of the day, and just about every other evening of the week when work and school have ended. Human interaction even between rural families is on an incredible decline. Most sociologists will point to the availability of good entertainment through their own televisions at home as one reason for the decline, but why have Christians allowed this individualization to occur? Why has the church allowed their community to descend so dramatically? Individualization has permeated just about every nook and cranny of the typical American's life, and the church has suffered for it.

This project began and was completed by thinking about two very distinct groups within the local church, and the project had to adjust as it transitioned between two very different local church settings. However, when I now look back, and think about the problems I wanted to address for the 20-year old college student I was responsible for at the megachurch, and compare those with the problems I want to address for the family that attends my small local church sporadically, I realize that both groups have exactly the same problems that this project wanted to address. The local church has ceased to be a priority for many believers, whether they are between the ages of 18-22, or whether they are married and have children that age. The theological considerations in this project, and the sociological ones, are both applicable to just about every group within the local church today. I love that about this project.

This project transitioned from a teaching series to college students to a sermon

series for a small local church, and while the technical aspects of this project had to change due to its audience, the theological and sociological principles stayed the same. I understand the local church and its struggles more clearly after having completed this project, and I'm thankful for the places where the Lord had me begin and end this labor of love. I think I love the local church even more than when I started this project, and I am convinced I believe more in her priority in the life of a believer than when I first started. I hope that anyone who picks up this project in the future and uses it within their own local church setting, finds the same means of grace and grows in their love for the local church, and finds new ways to make sure that the local church is a priority for every believer.

## APPENDIX 1

### RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

#### I. Pre- and post-project survey for church members.

##### Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to measure your beliefs toward the priority of the local church. This research is being conducted by Chas Shira for the purposes of a ministry project at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. In this research, you will be asked to answer the following questions both before and after the preaching series on the priority of the local church. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By your completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Please provide the following demographic information:

1. Please provide the last 4 digits of your Social Security number to be used as identification during the project: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Please select your age range from the following choices:  
18-29    30-39    40-49    50-59    60-69    70+

Please answer the following questions:

1. Attending the Sunday morning worship service at my local church is a priority for me.  

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
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2. The first thing on my mind when coming to Sunday morning worship is the expectation of hearing from God.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Strongly Agree

3. I am devoted to my local church body, and I show that devotion by regular, weekly attendance at Sunday morning worship.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Strongly Agree

4. I can develop and maintain a close relationship with God without being involved in a local church.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Strongly Agree

5. The local church, both its people and activities, are my strongest source of spiritual development.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Strongly Agree

6. Making sure that other believers at my local church are growing in their faith is a priority for me.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Strongly Agree

7. My lack of attendance at my local church on a Sunday morning only affects me negatively, not the entire congregation.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Strongly Agree

8. It is not important to be primarily involved at one local church, as long as I attend worship somewhere on a Sunday morning.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Strongly Agree

9. The church should hold its members accountable to Scripture, and the church has the responsibility and authority to rebuke and correct members when they are living outside of the commandments of the Lord.



Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Agree    Strongly Agree

10. It is the duty of a Christian to attend Sunday morning worship services each week.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Agree    Strongly Agree

11. I am using my spiritual gifts fully and performing my role as a member of this local church.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Agree    Strongly Agree

12. My personal spiritual development is a high priority for me.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Agree    Strongly Agree

13. I could be doing more as a member of this local church, and using my spiritual gifts more often.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Agree    Strongly Agree

14. I need the Sunday morning worship service each week to hear from the Lord, and grow spiritually.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Agree    Strongly Agree

15. I feel that my fellow church members expect me, and need me to be present with them each Sunday morning worship service.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Somewhat Disagree    Somewhat Agree    Agree    Strongly Agree

## APPENDIX 2

### SERMON 1 OUTLINE

#### **Sermon Title and Text**

Gathered Together at Mt. Sinai – Exodus 19 and 24

#### **Sermon Purpose**

To see that God has a history of gathering his people together and their responsibilities when they do gather.

#### **Sermon Outline**

- I. The people of God gather to hear from the Lord.
  - a. If God didn't speak, or initiate this conversation, there would be no covenant.
  - b. We gather to hear the agreement he is offering to us; never the opposite.
- II. The people of God gather to respond to the Lord.
  - a. The people respond "together": "All the people answered together" (Exo 19:8), "All the people answered with one voice" (Exo 24:3).
  - b. The people respond affirmatively: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exo 19:8), "All the words that the Lord has spoken we

will do” (Exo 24:3).

- III. The people of God gather to identify as the Lord’s people.
  - a. Only through responding together positively to the Lord’s arrangement do people become known as His people.
  - b. The identity of being known as God’s people only comes through a positive response to his word.
  
- IV. Conclusion
  - a. The people of God must come together to hear from the Lord and respond with obedience in order to continue being known as the people of God.
  - b. This is the foundation laid down in the Old Testament, and carried through to local churches today.

## APPENDIX 3

### SERMON 2 OUTLINE

#### **Sermon Title and Text**

The Early Church Devoted Together – Acts 2:42-47

#### **Sermon Purpose**

To learn from the early church what the local church today should be doing.

#### **Sermon Outline**

- I. The early church was devoted to the apostles' teaching.
  - a. They were said to have been attending the temple together “day by day” (Acts 2:46).
  - b. They were devoted to hearing and responding to the word of the Lord from the apostles.
- II. The early church was devoted to the fellowship.
  - a. Fellowship did not just refer to social gatherings, but rather their relationship to one another; they were devoted to one another.
  - b. Fellowship could have referred to the Lord's Supper, but in this context, it probably related more closely to their willingness to share meals together with one another, “in their homes” (Acts

2:46).

- c. Their devotion to one another is most pointedly described as, “all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44).

- i. This devotion to one another is what leads them to be willing to sell personal property to help with the needs of other church members (Acts 2:45).

III. The early church was devoted to the prayers.

- a. Their devotion to one another had a natural response of continually praying for one another.
- b. The daily attendance at the temple to hear the apostles’ teaching had a natural response of continual prayer.

IV. Conclusion

- a. The proper devotion of the church leads to potential blessings from the Lord: “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

## APPENDIX 4

### SERMON 3 OUTLINE

#### **Sermon Title and Text**

The Blood that Brings us Together – Hebrews 10:19-25

#### **Sermon Purpose**

The blood of Jesus is what should bring us together as a local church, and a failure to worship is a failure to value the life and death of Jesus.

#### **Sermon Outline**

- I. Because of the blood of Jesus, we should draw near through faith.
  - a. Enter boldly into the presence of God as no high priest has ever been able to do before (Heb 9:7).
  - b. The blood of Jesus has washed you cleaner through faith than any former high priest could have ever been washed.
- II. Because of the blood of Jesus, we should hold fast our hope.
  - a. The strength of our hope lies in the object of our hope; we should never doubt what the blood of Jesus has accomplished for us.
- III. Because of the blood of Jesus, we should stir one another up to love and good works.
  - a. We have a responsibility to one another in the church to make sure

that no one is forsaking the blood of Jesus.

- b. There are numerous reasons for why some had already begun to “neglect” gathering together, but the consensus among commentators is that apathy had already set in.
- c. William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: ““The neglect of worship and fellowship was symptomatic of a catastrophic failure to appreciate the significance of Christ’s priestly ministry and the access to God it provided.”

#### IV. Conclusion

- a. Do not let your failure to be present at your local church, be a failure to appreciate what the blood of Jesus has accomplished for you.
- b. Choose to be present to stir up the faith and hope and love of your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ; help them highly value the blood of Jesus.

## APPENDIX 5

### SERMON 4 OUTLINE

#### **Sermon Title and Text**

The Spirit that Brings us Together – 1 Corinthians 12

#### **Sermon Purpose**

Recognize that each church member has the same Holy Spirit that brings us together in unity and purpose.

#### **Sermon Outline**

- I. We each have been given the same Spirit.
  - a. God has given to every believer the gift of the Holy Spirit.
  - b. Since we all have the same Spirit there is incredible unity, even though there is diversity of gifts.
  - c. The context of 1 Corinthians 12 is that it follows Paul's denouncement of the Corinthians due to their lack of unity during the Lord's Supper.
- II. We each have been given the same Spirit for the common good.
  - a. Your gift or gifts were meant to be shared with the entire church body.
  - b. No Christian, who has the Holy Spirit, should be failing to share



their gift by not participating with a local body of believers.

- c. Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*: “gifts are not occasions for boasting, but opportunities for service.”

III. We each have been given the same Spirit so we would know that we need one another.

- a. With the metaphor of the body, it is abundantly clear that every person and their gift is needed to accomplish the work that God has given to the church.
- b. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*: ““the apparently superior cannot say to the apparently inferior, ‘We can get along without you.’”

IV. Conclusion

- a. The gift of the Holy Spirit to every believer brings incredible unity, as we know that everyone has the same blessing.
- b. And the varying gifts of the Holy Spirit help us to appreciate the varying roles that every believer plays in creating the body of Christ.
- c. Every believer and every gift is needed, and appreciated; the Spirit thus builds incredible unity within a local church.

## APPENDIX 6

### SERMON 5 OUTLINE

#### **Sermon Title and Text**

Discipline Holds the Church Together – Matthew 18:15-20

#### **Sermon Purpose**

Understand the value in practicing church discipline to maintain the church's identity as the people of God.

#### **Sermon Outline**

- I. We remove people from the church because some will refuse to repent.
  - a. Repentance is the visible identifier to the world that a person has placed their faith in Christ.
  - b. Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*: “Neither outsiders nor the sinner should continue under the delusion that this person is truly a follower of Jesus.”
  - c. A perfect example for removal is given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 when a church member has engaged in sin that even the local Roman culture condemns as immoral.
- II. We remove people from the church because the church has the

responsibility to represent Christ.

- a. A complete representation of Christ for the world requires the church to administer judgment when needed.
- b. Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*: “Church discipline may be defined as a proleptic (or anticipatory) and declarative sign of the divine eschatological judgment, meted out by Jesus Christ through the church against its sinful members and sinful situations.”

III. We remove people from the church because we recognize that sin ruins.

- a. If the local church is the body of Christ, then allowing sin to remain within its members is like allowing cancer to remain in a body; it will continue to spread and bring further disease and death.
- b. Amputation is a last resort, but needed in order to stop disease from spreading and killing the entire body.

IV. Conclusion

- a. A church that fails to discipline its members who refuse to repent of sin is a church that no longer represents Christ to the world.
- b. John L. Dagg: “when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.”

## APPENDIX 7

### SERMON 6 OUTLINE

#### **Sermon Title and Text**

Biblical Leadership Holds the Church Together – 1 Timothy 3:1-13

#### **Sermon Purpose**

To show how the leadership structure outlined in Scripture helps the church to thrive.

#### **Sermon Outline**

- I. The biblical office of elder.
  - a. There are many terms used for this office, both in scripture translations and also denominations, but the office of elder is primarily responsible for teaching and shepherding the congregation.
  - b. The biblical descriptions seem to imply that most local churches had more than one man serving in this role.
  - c. There are both spiritual and practical reasons for having more than one elder, as it keeps one man from having too much authority and power which is not healthy for him, or the church, and it also provides a way for the gifts of different men to be utilized as one

man is usually not proficient in every gift needed to shepherd an entire church.

- d. The list of qualifications for an elder is very similar to deacon, however the elder must be able to teach, which is different than the office of deacon.

## II. The biblical office of deacon.

- a. The role of deacons appears to be to assist the elders in their shepherding of the church.
- b. Their list of qualifications is similar to an elder, however they do not have to be able to teach, thus allowing the office of deacon to be held by women as well as men.

## III. Conclusion

- a. The church should be led by elders in the areas of teaching and shepherding, and it should be led by a plurality of men if they are qualified.
- b. Deacons should assist the elders in whatever areas are needed in order for the elders to focus on their primary ministries of shepherding and teaching.
- c. The blue print for leadership that God laid down should be followed by any church seeking to be obedient to the Lord.

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## ABSTRACT

### DEVELOPING A PREACHING SERIES ON THE PRIORITY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH GATHERING FOR O'BRIEN BAPTIST CHURCH, O'BRIEN, TEXAS

Charles William Shira, Jr., D.Min.  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016  
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Brian J. Vickers

The purpose of this project was to develop a preaching series on the priority of the local church gathering. Chapter 1 presents the purpose, goals, ministry context, rationale, definitions, limitations and delimitations, and research methodology for this project.

Chapter 2 presents the biblical and theological support for the priority of the local church gathering. The chapter is divided into six sections that correspond to six sermons, covering the biblical and theological reasons for why the local church gathering should be a priority in the life of a believer. Chapter 3 addresses the theoretical support for the priority of the local church gathering. This chapter surveys both the sociological and spiritual reasons for why church attendance has been declining. Chapters 4 and 5 provide details and descriptions for how the project was implemented, as well as evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the project.

## VITA

Charles William Shira, Jr.

### EDUCATIONAL

B.B.A, Hardin-Simmons University, 2001

M.Div., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008

### MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Summer Intern, Ronnie Hill Ministries, Fort Worth, Texas, 1998, 1999

Interim Youth Minister, First Baptist Church, Springtown, Texas, 2004-2005

Associate Pastor and Student Minister, McKinney Street Baptist Church,  
Denton, Texas, 2006-2011

Associate Minister to College Students and Young Adults, Mobberly Baptist  
Church, Longview, Texas, 2011-2015

Pastor, O'Brien Baptist Church, O'Brien, Texas, 2015-