

***Find Out What Pleases the Lord***

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. -Ephesians 5:8-10*

We have three choices in this life of whom we will try to please. As you may have guessed, there is only one right choice.

One choice is to live to please self. The tendency for most of us is to live to please ourselves first because of our inbred selfish nature. When the priority is to please self, our duties and obligations to serve God and others (employers, children, spouses, teachers, parents...) are just that. Some people are more blatant in their self-pleasing lifestyle, but any degree selfishness will eventually end up in loss according to Jesus who taught us that whoever lives for self will lose their very life.

A second choice is to live to please others. Whether motivated by the need for the approval or rewards of others or by the fear of some reprisal by a manipulative relation, the choice to live according to someone else's wishes can never lead to freedom and fulfillment. Putting others ahead of self is not bad but when their voice is heard louder than the voice of God, pleasing them becomes co-dependency at best and idolatry at worst.

The third choice, of course, is to live to please God. This is the only choice that will bring true and lasting blessing to self and others. It is the only choice that will prevent two very natural things, self-preservation and love for others, from turning into unhealthy, detrimental compulsions. When we find out what pleases the Lord and we put his pleasure first, true blessings come to us and through us as we receive the favor of God. Don't think that you are giving up on your own fulfillment if you are intent on finding out what pleases the Lord and then doing it. A basic tenet of Scripture is that if you please God first, the things that you need and even the things that you desire will be your portion from the Lord (see Matthew 6:33 and Psalm 37:4).

How do you find out what pleases the Lord? The best answer I can give is, "Ask him." Yes, you should study out the word. Yes, you should present your body as a living sacrifice. And yes, it is possible to mistake the voice of God for your own or someone else's. But day by day and moment by moment, perhaps the most expedient and fruitful thing to do is to just go ahead and ask him. If you really want to know, most of the time it will become clear in the asking. And just the asking, in itself, will be something that will please the Lord.

***It is the only choice that will prevent self-preservation and love for others from turning into detrimental compulsions***

***The Wife Must Respect Her Husband***

*Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. -Ephesians 5:33*

My wife and I were leading our first couples' retreat. About ten couples from our church headed out for the weekend, albeit the women being more eager than the men to do so (one reluctant husband said, "Why should I go to find out what a lousy husband I've been"). We opened up with a simple question to both the men and the women about what it was that they most needed as husbands and as wives. The women were ready and willing to share what it was that they needed. The primary thing mentioned by the wives was that they wanted to be loved. Then, of course, the women wanted to hear from the men. Silence. "C'mon you guys. We told you what we need the most, now you tell us what it is that you need." More silence. Then the one non-Christian guy in the group spoke up. "Hearing 'I love you' is ok but I would rather hear, 'I'm proud of you.'" The women were stunned. All the wives checked in with their husbands to find out if the same were true for the rest of us and we all heartily agreed.

***A man will respond to respect more than he will respond to love***

The women assumed that what the men wanted most was love. But what we as men identified with more was "respect." Imagine our "surprise" later that weekend when we took a look at Ephesians 5 where it says, *husbands, love your wives* (v25), and *the wife must respect her husband* (v33). Because of our earlier conversation, we figured that Paul might have been on to something.

It is a heartbreaking thing for a wife to have a husband who is not worthy of respect. What wife wouldn't want to respect her husband? What husband would not want to be respected? Unfortunately, there are cases where wives have to work hard to obey Paul's admonition to respect their husbands. But before any wife writes her husband off as unworthy of her respect, she should know that her husband needs her respect more than she could ever imagine. If a wife could find something in her not so stellar husband of which to be proud and begin to build him up with that, it could go a long way toward helping him become the kind of man that she could truly respect.

Emerson Eggerichs has written a groundbreaking book on the subject entitled, "Love and Respect." He makes a solid biblical case for wives to give their husbands "unconditional respect." A man will respond to respect more than he will respond to love. Wives who remember this and put it into practice will reap benefits beyond what they could have dreamed.

***Pray in the Spirit on All Occasions***

*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. -Ephesians 6:18*

In Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, you will sometimes hear the admonition to “pray in the Spirit.” This is understood by many to mean “pray in tongues.” I take this interpretation to be a narrow view of what Paul meant when he said to the Ephesians, “*Pray in the Spirit on all occasions.*”

When Paul told the Ephesians (and us) to pray in the Spirit, it was in the context of instruction regarding spiritual warfare. It comes on the heels of his famous exhortation to *put on the full armor of God* (6:13). This being the case, I can see how it might be interpreted that he was exhorting the Ephesians to pray in tongues as a means of warring in the spirit. But a further look at the context indicates that Paul probably had more in mind. He says, “*Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*” The statement, “*All kinds of prayers and requests,*” carries the inference that there is understanding concerning what you are requesting. And if we are to *always keep on praying for all the saints*, this ministry of intercession will need to encompass more than just praying in tongues.

I think some people confuse “praying in the Spirit” with “praying with your spirit.” Here, and in Jude 1:20, the phrase, *pray in the Spirit*, is used, meaning to pray under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (note the capital “S”). Praying with your spirit (lowercase “s”) is the act of praying in tongues as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:14-15: “*If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind....*”

So what does it mean to pray in the Spirit? Well—what does it mean to worship in the Spirit (see John 4:23-24; Philippians 3:3)? What does it mean to walk in the Spirit (see Galatians 5:25)? What does it mean to be in the Spirit (see Revelation 1:10)? It means to be under the control, direction and influence of the Holy Spirit.

The best description of praying in the Spirit is given by Paul when he said “*The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will* (Ro 8:26-27). To *pray in the Spirit* does not at all preclude praying in tongues. It’s just not limited to it.

***What does it mean to pray in the Spirit?***

***Overseers and Deacons***

*To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. -Philippians 1:1-2*

Paul addresses his Philippian letter *to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.* He specifically mentions the overseers and deacons. Why these two offices and no others?

If you search it out, you will find that the New Testament allows for only two governmental offices in the local church: Overseers and deacons. No board of trustees. No board of directors. No church council. Overseers and deacons. Period. I am talking about governmental offices in the local church—those who direct the affairs of the church. There are also what I would call “ministry offices:” Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers who are given to the church to equip the saints for the work of ministry. Apostles and shepherds would naturally also be overseers but not necessarily prophets, evangelists or teachers.

***There are only two governmental offices in the local church: Overseers and deacons***

An overseer is a recognized and appointed shepherd in the local assembly. In the New Testament, you will find the terms “overseer,” “pastor” and “elder” used interchangeably. They are one and the same office (if you don’t believe this, take a look at Acts 20:17, 28 and 1 Peter 5:1-2). Overseers are given the responsibilities of directing the affairs of the church (1 Ti 5:17); keeping watch over the flock (Ac 20:28-29; 1 Pe 5:2-3; He 13:17); serving as examples (1 Peter 5:3, 1 Co 11:1, He 13:7); stewarding the work of God (Titus 1:7; Eph 4:11-12; 1 Ti 4:14); guarding sound doctrine (Ac 20:30-31; Titus 1:9) and praying for the sick (Ja 5:14).

A deacon is one to whom responsibility has been given to oversee a particular ministry within the church. Deacons are appointed by the overseers and are given authority over their particular ministry. The classic scriptural example of this office is the case where the apostles appointed seven “deacons” to oversee the ministry of food distribution saying, “*We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word*” (Ac 6:3-4).

Notice in Paul’s salutation that “overseers” is plural. Nowhere in the New Testament will you find the role of a singular or “Senior Pastor.” Nowhere. There was always a plurality of elders in the New Testament churches (see Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; James 5:14).

To govern the local church according to the New Testament model, overseers and deacons are the only two offices that should be engaged.

***Whether from False Motives or True***

*It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.... But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. -Philippians 1:15, 18*

I was a fledgling Christian visiting Florida with my younger brother who did not yet know the Lord. We were in a motel room watching a documentary style movie entitled “Marjoe.” Marjoe Gortner had been a child evangelist but had turned away from that calling, and, if I remember correctly, from Christianity itself. The film chronicled Gortner’s adult travels as he pretended to be a bona fide evangelist, preaching at different churches and revival meetings. There were many scenes of Gortner preaching the gospel with people responding to his altar call, only to be followed by scenes of Gortner and his entourage getting drunk afterwards and secretly mocking all those who had come forward that night to “get saved.” I was more than a little concerned about how my brother would interpret all this and I also wondered about the salvation of those who had come to Christ under these false pretenses. A few weeks later, as I was back home and listening to the Moody Radio show, “Dial the Pastor,” at least part of my question was answered. A call had come in concerning evangelists who had been preaching the gospel while living in sin. The radio teacher, Donald Cole, referred the caller to this passage in Philippians where Paul said, *“Whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”*

***The gospel has intrinsic power notwithstanding the motive of the messenger***

Are you surprised by Paul’s reaction to those who preached the gospel with impure motives? Paul had realized that his imprisonment for preaching the gospel had been a motivating factor for others to preach as well. Because of Paul’s chains, many of the Christians were *encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly* (v14). There were others, however, who were jealous of Paul and had used his imprisonment as an opportunity to discredit his ministry and promote their own. They preached the gospel out of *envy, rivalry* (v15) and *selfish ambition* (v17). But in one sense, Paul didn’t seem to care. His viewpoint was that the gospel had intrinsic power for the salvation of all who would believe, notwithstanding the motive of the messenger. So, Gortner’s message was true, even if he wasn’t.

It should be apparent that motives do matter and that those who preach with impure motives will reap what their duplicity has sown. But the gospel is still the gospel, with the power to save, heal and deliver.

***Made Himself Nothing***

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing...Therefore God exalted him...-Philippians 2:5-7, 9*

There is no more consequential question Jesus asks than, *“Who do you say that I am”* (Lk 9:20). Christology is what a person believes about Jesus. A person’s Christology affects their eternal welfare. Undoubtedly, one of the most significant passages of Scripture regarding Christology is Philippians 2:5-11. Let’s take a look.

You will notice that, in the NIV, verses 6-11 are in poetic form, consonant with the near certainty that Paul is quoting a hymn of the church. If you want to know what a church believes, just listen to what they sing. The New Testament church sang, and believed, that Jesus was *in very nature God*. He is *the image of the invisible God* (Co 1:15) in whom *all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form* (Co 2:9). The writer of Hebrews put it this way: *The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being* (1:3).

***Jesus was willing to “let go” of his pre-incarnate divine prerogatives***

But *being in very nature God*, Jesus *did not consider equality with God something to be grasped*. What most theologians take this to mean is that Jesus was willing to “let go” of his pre-incarnate divine prerogatives, making *himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness* (v7). There has been much discussion in scholarly circles about what it really meant for Jesus to “make himself nothing.” The Greek verb is “kenoo,” which more literally means “to empty,” so the process of Jesus divesting himself of his divine rights is known as “kenosis.”

This theological pursuit is actually valuable because it is about knowing who Jesus really is and what it was he really did. Understanding the nature of this kenosis gives us insight into the nature of Jesus himself, which gives us an understanding of his example for us. And this is exactly Paul’s point in quoting this inspired hymn. *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus....* Jesus, being in “very nature” God, took on the “very nature” of a servant. *He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on the cross* (v8).

The hymn comes full circle. Jesus empties himself of divine glory, becomes a humble servant, only to be exalted to the highest place with the name which is above every other name (v9). Can it be any clearer that if we want to share in his exaltation, we must have our own kenosis?

***Do Everything without Complaining or Arguing***

*Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life. -Philippians 2:14-16*

*Do everything without complaining or arguing.* Here is one of those scriptures that when you read it, part of you wants to say, “Did he really mean that?” And another part knows that he did. Paul’s admonition hits too close to home for most of us because our propensity to complain or argue is all too natural.

Are we really supposed to do everything without complaining or arguing? The short answer to that question, of course, is “yes.” But let’s define more accurately what it means to do everything without complaining or arguing. The kind of complaining that Paul is talking about here more of the grumbling kind. It’s when you grumble when your co-worker gets the nicer office. It’s when your teenager whines when he has to mow the grass. And arguing takes the complaining a step further. When your teenager is no longer just complaining that he has to mow the lawn but is contending with you about actually doing it—he is now arguing

***He is talking about doing things with a right attitude***

When Paul says, “*Do everything without complaining or arguing,*” the emphasis is just as much, or more, on the doing than on not complaining or arguing. He is talking about doing things with a right attitude. Notice that the result of doing everything without complaining or arguing is becoming blameless and pure, shining like stars in a crooked and depraved generation. When we let our light shine, people see our good works and they glorify the Father in heaven. This will not happen if we are bellowing about our lot in life or the particular assignment that we would rather not have.

Does this mean that we should never voice a complaint or debate a point? No. There is a difference between “complaining” and having a complaint. Nobody likes a whiner, including the Lord: *Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused* (Nu 11:1). Compare this to David’s prayer when he was holed up in a cave as a fugitive from injustice: “*I pour out my complaint before him; before him I tell my trouble*” (Ps 142:2). And arguing about what you have been given to do is different from contending for the truth.

Jesus did everything without complaining or arguing. He was blameless and pure, without fault in a crooked and depraved generation in which he shined as he held out the word of life.

***That for Which Christ Jesus Took Hold of me***

*I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. -Philippians 3:12-14*

For our church service one day, we had a panel discussion which we called, “The Hall of Tyrannus” (taken from Acts 19:9 where for two years Paul had daily discussions with the disciples in an Ephesus lecture hall). One of the questions submitted was about how to know when we are “striving” and when we are being empowered by grace. Implicit in the idea of striving is a sense of ineffectual human effort. But there is something considerably effective about giving all you have to take hold of your calling in Christ.

Think for a moment about why Jesus died. Your first thought, no doubt, is about the redemption of sin. He is *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). But, as A.W. Tozer has said, “Jesus does not just save us from something, he saves us to something.”

***Christ redeemed you; not just your sin.***

Christ redeemed you; not just your sin. Ultimately, Jesus died for you so that the purpose for which you were created could be fulfilled. And Paul was intent, perhaps even desperate, to see that purpose fulfilled in his own life. *I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

Jesus took hold of you for a purpose. He took hold of me for a purpose. Do you have any sense of what that purpose is? Are you pressing on with all you are worth to take hold of it? The reason Jesus took hold of you includes heaven—but more than heaven. You have a purpose; a destiny; a calling. If you want it, press in to take hold of it.

For Paul, it was about *forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead*. For us, it should be about not letting anything stop us from taking hold of that for which Jesus took hold of us. If he took hold of us for a purpose—and he did—we need to fight to know that high calling and to see it gloriously accomplished in our lives. That is not vain striving. It is pressing in and pressing on.

Do you think that God honoured Paul’s tenacity? What will it require then for you to take hold of that for which Jesus took hold of you?

***Let Your Gentleness Be Evident to All***

*Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. -Philippians 4:5*

I have to admit that I don't always value gentleness. Perhaps it is because there are times when I associate gentleness with weakness—a fact which likely exposes my fear of being, or being seen as, weak. But in my true self—the one without those insecurities, I truly value this thing called gentleness. And more than that, I know that others, like my wife and the church of which I am a shepherd, value it in me.

What exactly is gentleness? In the New Testament, there are two Greek terms with similar in meanings which can be translated “gentleness.” The first is akin to what we might generally think of when we use the word “gentle.” It is “handling with care.” It is using the “gentle cycle.” The second is not much different, but it is more akin to what we might generally think of when we use the word “considerate.” It is peaceable and merciful—the opposite of violent or harsh. This second term is the one that Paul uses in this Philippian passage.

***You are only as gentle as people know you to be***

Gentleness is one of those things that needs to be evident to others in order to be substantiated. “*Let your gentleness be evident to all,*” Paul says to the Philippians. You are only as gentle as people know you to be. If people don't see your gentleness they won't know if they can trust you and chances are they will be more guarded around you. The toughest of guys and the manliest of men need to have a tender side. If not, they will end up alone in life. And, if you are ever going to minister to someone in their place of pain, you have got to learn to be gentle.

Gentleness must be evident to all—even to those who turn your crank. What credit is it to you if you are considerate only to those who are considerate to you? You can't be selective with whom you will be gentle. If you are harsh or violent with one person, it will decrease the credibility of your gentleness with others.

When we let our gentleness be evident to all, it doesn't mean that we never exhibit strength, toughness or aggressiveness. It just means that people know that we can and will be gentle in the situations that call for it. People need to experience our gentleness and know that even though we may need to be tough, we will never be harsh.

On the heels of Paul's admonition to let our gentleness be evident to all, he says, “*The Lord is near.*” Perhaps keeping in mind the immanent return of the Lord will help us to maintain our gentleness. After all, no one wants to be found beating the Lord's servants when he returns (see Matthew 24:49).

***The Secret of Being Content in Any and Every Situation***

*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. -Philippians 4:11-13*

Contentment does not depend on circumstance. Paul's testimony was that he had learned *the secret of being content in any and every situation. Whatever the circumstances*, Paul was able to be content. What was this secret that Paul had learned?

I think that for most people, contentment does depend on circumstance. It depends on getting the right job, having the dream house, driving the nice car, finding that special person. If these, or whatever other things to which people are looking to make them happy, are not there, then it is a case of contentment missing or lost. Of course, the job, house, car and special person can, and should, be received with thankfulness. Paul said, “*I know what it is to have plenty.*” He did not swear off prosperity. He just did not need it in order to be content. And remember, there is a difference between contentment and complacency.

***Contentment does not depend on circumstance***

I think the secret of Paul's contentment was simply that he did not look to things to make him happy. The reason Paul's contentment didn't depend on his circumstances was that he didn't depend on circumstances for his contentment. He found his contentment in the Lord. Remember that Paul is writing this letter from prison. Here is a man who *five times received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times was beaten with rods, once was stoned, three times was shipwrecked* (2 Co 11:24-25). He labored, toiled, went without food, water, sleep and even clothes (not exactly the prosperity gospel) (see 2 Corinthians 11:27). And he referred to his troubles as *light and momentary* (2 Co 4:17). Those who find their contentment in the Lord not only can ride out the hard times, they are the most likely of people to be able to appreciate the “plenty” when they have it.

Philippians 4:13 can be taken out of context, and usually is. This famous verse was born out of Paul's discussion of the secret of his contentment. Just a slight punctuation change and we would read: *Whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want, I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*

Circumstances change. Jesus does not. The secret to be content in any and every situation is to find your contentment in him.

### ***Faith and Love That Spring from Hope Stored in Heaven***

*We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven.... -Colossians 1:4-5*

Much has been said about faith, hope and love. We know that love is the greatest of the three—the greatest of all things, in fact (see 1 Corinthians 13:13). We know that *without faith it is impossible to please God* (He 11:6). But did you know that faith and love spring from hope?

Paul begins his letter to the Colossians by commending them for their faith and love. He had heard about their *faith in Christ Jesus* and their *love for all the saints*. And then Paul makes this comment about the source of the faith and love that they possessed:

***It is the hope that we have in the next life that makes faith in Jesus worthwhile***

The faith that we have in Jesus, and the love that we have for the saints, comes from and is supplied by the hope that is stored up for us in heaven. How does this work? To understand what Paul is saying, you have to know what he means by hope. Hope, as described in the New Testament, is much more than wishful thinking. It is the confident expectation of something that is to come. The hope that is stored up for us in heaven is the confident expectation of all that we will receive and experience when we get there. If we had no hope of heaven, then what basis would there be for our faith in Christ? As Paul says elsewhere, *“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied”* (1 Co 15:19). It is the hope that we have in the next life that makes faith in Jesus worthwhile. It is that hope that fuels our faith. Without that hope, why have faith? Our faith actually springs from that hope. And so does our love. If there is no heaven, then what is the point of thinking about anything other than pleasing ourselves? Why care about other people if we have no hope that what we do in this life will have any bearing in the next for ourselves or for others? We might as well *eat and drink, for tomorrow we die* (1 Co 15:32).

But we do, however, have a hope stored up for us in heaven. Because of this, we will continue in our faith in Jesus and our love for others, knowing that there is a *crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award* (2 Ti 4:8) to all who persevere in faith and love. This is the hope from which faith and love spring forth.

### ***The Head***

*And he is the head of the body, the church. -Colossians 1:18*

Every organization has a head office. Ours happens to be in heaven. This is not as impractical of a concept as one might think. Despite the lack of a fax, phone or email, our CEO, heads up the organization and intends to direct its affairs. Before he left for heaven he said, *“I will build my church”* (Mt 16:18) and he is still in the process of doing just that. Our local assembly happens to be one of many thousands of offices located worldwide. There are hundreds in my city alone. I happen to gather with other company officers from our city on a regular basis to meet with and hear from our chief. A few years ago, I traveled to Atlanta and met with 40,000 other officers to receive direction and inspiration from our leader.

And what an incredible leader we have. Not only did he meet with us in Atlanta, he meets with everyone in the organization (he prefers to call it his "body") on a regular basis. He is available to meet with every single person, not just the leaders. And every local office has direct access to him anytime day or night through a communication system much more advanced than video conferencing or satellite up-link. It's called prayer, and it is directed by the organization's communication supervisor. Amazingly, our CEO takes a personal interest in the building up of every local office and is able to keep abreast on everything that happens to everyone in this multimillion-member organization. Besides this, he has yet to make a mistake in judgment as he directs the day to day operation of the corporation.

***Our local assembly happens to be one of many thousands of offices located worldwide***

However, there are some problems. Even though the company's policy manual has been with us for a long time there is disagreement on what it actually means. Many of the offices have created separate divisions, given themselves different names and tend to work more for themselves than for the founder. Many of the officers have fear, mistrust and jealousy and refuse to meet together. They prefer to work on their own, discounting the synergy a concerted effort would bring to accomplish the company's goals in the world. Most offices have their own goals, and that is about all they care about, even though many are weak, understaffed and ineffective. Many of the local offices have internal conflict over what their mandate is. This often results in mutiny or desertion by the organization members, claiming that they have a special mandate from the CEO to do it.

Too bad. If the church would really cooperate with our CEO and let him be the head, think how far the organization could go.

***What Is Still Lacking in Regard to Christ's Afflictions***

*Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. -Colossians 1:24*

This scripture requires a double-take. At first, it appears to be heresy and, if it weren't in the Bible, a second consideration would be deemed unwarranted. Whoever said this would be considered more than suspect and we would quickly add a chapter to the latest book on cult leaders. But it was Paul who said it and it is in the Bible. So, a second look it is.

To say that the suffering and death of Jesus was somehow insufficient or incomplete for our salvation would indeed be heresy. But Paul didn't say, "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, to purchase your salvation." He said, "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." "Still," you say, "it sounds like Paul is saying that Jesus' suffering wasn't enough." What could have been lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions?"

***What is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions has nothing to do with the atonement***

It's not that Jesus' suffering was deficient. *He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed (Is 53:5).* His passion was sufficient to purchase the personal well-being and eternal salvation of every person who has ever lived. What was, and is, lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions has nothing to do with the atonement. It has to do with the continued redemptive benefits that suffering brings to the body of Christ. Jesus has completed his suffering but his ministry still continues on the earth in the form of his body, the church. The sufferings of Jesus are incomplete insofar as the work of Jesus is incomplete. His atoning work is complete but his ministry is not. And as long as there are those who are continuing his ministry, there will not only be suffering, but a need for suffering. It just so happened that for the sake of the church, Paul was taking on a great share of the sufferings of Jesus—and in that he rejoiced.

Sorry to bust into your comfort zone like this, but suffering is not all bad. Suffering results in obedience (see Hebrews 5:8); perseverance, character and hope (see Romans 5:3-4); perfection (see Hebrews 2:10); glory (see Romans 8:17-18); deliverance from sin (see 1 Peter 4:1) and genuine faith (see 1 Peter 1:7). Just like Jesus, Paul suffered for the sake of the church. His suffering, like his Lord's, would result in the well-being and salvation of many.

***Do Not Handle! Do Not Taste! Do Not Touch!***

*"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"...Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. -Colossians 2:21, 23*

Have you noticed how often those who live under strict religious regulation end up hog-wild in sensual indulgence? I know a man who grew up in a very strict German Mennonite colony which practiced, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" He told me that about a third of the young adults, including him, left the colony and went totally wild into the world. They broke free from legalistic righteousness but they had no moral restraint. This is an illustration of Paul's contention that religious regulations based on human commands and teachings (v22) lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. Do we want to restrain sensual indulgence? Yes. But, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" is not the way to do it.

***Religion has no power to restrain the flesh behind closed doors***

Paul names three characteristics that give profound insight into this notoriously false religious spirit. The first is *self-imposed worship*. This is not spirit-inspired worship at all. It is, as the NASB translates it, *self-made religion*, worship imposed by human regulation. You don't have to look long and hard to find examples of this in the church. The second is *false humility*. Religion smacks of false humility. Religion is rooted in pride, though it wants to give the appearance of humility. But it is all a sham because it has nothing to do with God and everything to do with self—ala the Pharisees. The third is *harsh treatment of the body*. This goes beyond the positive use of spiritual disciplines. All over the world you will find people who abuse themselves as religious exercise. When these things are done for others to see, and most of the time they are, it is a sure sign that a religious spirit is at work.

The problem with all this religious activity, as Paul sees it, is that none of it has *any value in restraining sensual indulgence*. Religion has no power to restrain the flesh behind closed doors. "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" has an insidious *appearance of wisdom*, but will not save even the most sincere person from what Tozer called the lion and adder of the flesh.

Humanly imposed teachings that attempt to subdue the flesh through the force of religion will fail to make the grade. A love for Jesus and the power of the Spirit will do you much better.

### ***Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs***

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. -Colossians 3:16*

An important issue in the local church is the kind of songs that will be sung in worship. People have their preferences and it is easy to project those preferences onto what must be pleasing to God. Discord in the church due to conflicting preferences of musical style is no abnormality. These preferences are usually tied to cultural and age differences—though not always. But whatever fashion of music is used in church worship, there are considerations that go personal preferences of style.

The Bible actually has something to say about the type of songs that should be sung in the church, but it has more to do with substance than style. Twice in the New Testament letters, once in Ephesians and once in Colossians, the church is instructed to sing *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*. More relevant to our life in the Spirit than the issue of what styles will be employed in our worship is the balance of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

***Psalms are songs of devotion, hymns are songs of doctrine and spiritual songs are songs of the Spirit***

There must a distinction in the three genres, otherwise, why would Paul mention all three in the same breath, not only once, but twice in his inspired writings. *Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* must, by necessity, each be a different type of song with a different purpose. What are they?

Robert Webber, Professor of Christian Worship at Wheaton College has identified the differences as follows: *Psalms* (Greek: psalmos) are songs of praise and worship that include, but are not limited to, the Hebrew Psalms. *Psalms*, then, are your songs of devotion to the Lord. *Hymns* (Greek: humnos) are songs of Christian doctrine. Hymns of the early church can be found in the New Testament, i.e., Philippians 2:6-11; 1 Timothy 3:16; Ephesians 4:8. Hymns are not always sung. They are sometimes recited (see 1 Corinthians 14:26). *Spiritual songs* (Greek: pneumatikos ode) are “songs of the Spirit.” They are not “spirituals” as in “Negro Spirituals.” They are extemporaneous songs inspired by the Holy Spirit in the public gathering.

As you can see, these classifications of songs have nothing to do with musical style. Frankly, I don’t think the Lord cares much what style you use. What is important is if you are employing a balance of songs of devotion, songs of doctrine and songs of the Spirit as you gather for public worship.

Are you doing all three in your church?

### ***For this Pleases the Lord***

*Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. - Colossians 3:20-21 [This devotional is written to children]*

When you disobey your parents, it is not only displeasing to them; it is displeasing to the Lord. But, when you obey your parents, it is not only pleasing to them; it is pleasing to the Lord. For the Bible says, Children, *obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord*.

Everything you do should be done in order to please the Lord. Asking the question, “What would Jesus do?” is really asking what would please God because everything that Jesus did was pleasing to his Father. During Jesus’ life on earth there came a voice from heaven which said, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased*” (Mt 3:17; 17:5). Why was God pleased with Jesus? Because he was good looking? Because he was talented? No, because he was an obedient son. And Jesus not only obeyed his heavenly Father. When he was young, he obeyed his earthly father and mother as well. Do you remember when Jesus was twelve years old and his parents had searched all over Jerusalem and finally found him at the temple talking with the teachers? Well, the Bible says that after that, he *went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them*.

***Parents are acting as God’s representatives, teaching you the difference between right and wrong. When you obey them, it is like obeying the Lord.***

Why does obeying your parents please the Lord? In a way, obeying your parents is like obeying the Lord. Your parents aren’t perfect like the Lord—they do make mistakes. But parents are acting as God’s representatives, teaching you the difference between right and wrong. When you obey them, it is like obeying the Lord. When you disobey them, it is like disobeying the Lord, because when you disobey those in authority, especially your parents, you have disobeyed those whom God has given to watch over you. And, the Lord won’t be pleased if you obey your parents just some of the time. You have to obey them all of the time. Of course, if your parents or others in authority tell you to do something that you know is wrong, then you have to obey what you know God would want you to do instead.

And so I say to parents, if you are harsh with your kids or too hard on them, what do you think that will do to them? The Bible says, *do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged*. If you are harsh or too hard, you will be making it hard for your children to want to obey you. And more than that, because you are God’s representatives, you will be turning them off from wanting to obey God as well.

### ***He Is Always Wrestling in Prayer for You***

*Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you... -Colossians 4:12-13*

Prayer can be hard work, especially what is known as intercession. Perhaps that is why it seems that most Christians don't do it. Even those of us who have a regular prayer life have to ask ourselves if we "wrestle" in prayer for others when we go before the Lord.

As Paul ends this letter to the Colossians, he relays greetings from different persons who were with him as fellow prisoners or who had visited him and ministered to him while in chains. One of the persons who sent greetings to the saints at Colosse was a man named Epaphras. Apparently, he was from Colosse, so it would have been natural for Epaphras to want Paul to send his greetings back home in the letter. But there was something else that made those greetings even more genuine. As Paul remarks to the Colossians about this *servant of Christ Jesus*, he says, "*He is always wrestling in prayer for you.*"

***He was being more than watchful. He was wrestling for them.***

If I am going to wrestle in prayer for someone, it will have to be someone for whom I care. Most of the time, the affections which motivate me to go into spiritual combat will be ones which have naturally grown over time. It will be my "loved ones" for whom I am most often motivated to pray. But I have known of many cases where the Lord put strong sentiment in the heart of intercessors who were willing to pray his heart for those who perhaps didn't have any "loved ones" to stand in the gap for their welfare.

Now Epaphras, motivated by love for the people in Colosse, took this prayer thing seriously. Part of Paul's closing exhortation to the Colossians was "*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful*" (4:2). So, here Paul had a real live example of someone who was devoting himself to prayer. He was being watchful and praying that the Colossians would *stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured*. But he was being more than watchful. He was wrestling for them. The Greek term is *agōnizomai*. Jesus knew this same intercession for us in the garden: *And being in anguish (agōnia), he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground* (Lk 22:44).

Intercession can be hard, agonizing work. But how would you like to have an Epaphras in your life? Better yet, what would it take for you to become an Epaphras?

### ***With Power, with the Holy Spirit and with Deep Conviction***

*For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. -1 Thessalonians 1:4-5*

One of my most fervent and oft-prayed prayers is that the gospel we preach would come, *not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction*. Anything less than that is less than what Jesus died for.

We settle for so little in the church today. We expect so little. When Paul came into Macedonia, and more specifically into the city of Thessalonica, the gospel that he preached was confirmed by the fact that it came with more than just words. It seems to me that so much of our preaching is just words. Where is the power? Where is the Holy Spirit? Where is the deep conviction?

***Much of our preaching is just words***

If you're like me, you have experienced those times when you saw the gospel come with more than simply words. The presence and the conviction of the Holy Spirit were undeniable—even irrepressible. The power of God was evident. People were healed and delivered. The glory of God was unmistakable. That is the way the gospel is meant to come; *not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power* (1 Co 2:4).

One of the times I experienced the gospel in this way was in 1998, near La Plata, Argentina. It was an outdoor meeting with Carlos Annacondia—a man whom Peter Wagner has called the greatest urban evangelist since Paul. Brother Annacondia's message was simple, but it was much more than *simply words*. It came *with the Holy Spirit*. The Spirit's presence in that place was unmistakable. It came *with power*. When Annacondia addressed the forces of darkness, the expulsion of demons happened exactly as the Bible describes it. It was so obviously supernatural, there is no way that the manifestations of the demonic before our eyes could have been explained away as psychological phenomena. And it was *with deep conviction*. When the altar call for salvation was given, there was so much conviction in that place that I wanted to go forward and "get saved" all over again.

Because of that experience and others like it I am ruined for any gospel that does not carry the weight of God's glory. "Oh God, let the gospel we preach come with more than simply words. Let it come with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction."

### ***What Is the Crown in Which We Will Glory?***

*What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. -1 Thessalonians 2:19-20*

Have you thought about the things in heaven which will bring you the most joy? Other than seeing the Lord face to face, what will make you the happiest? Will it be the “golden streets?” Will it be the “mansion over the hilltop?” Will it be the fellowship of the patriarchs? Will it not be the satisfaction of knowing that there are people with you in heaven who might not otherwise be there if not for your witness and prayers?

People were Paul’s joy and crown; the people whom he loved; the people who came to salvation in Christ through his ministry. In speaking about his intense longing to see his brothers and sisters—and, yes, his children in the faith, he says, on behalf of Silas and Timothy, *“What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.”*

Imagine Paul’s heart at the return of Christ and end of the age. Jesus says that at that time, *all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats* (Mt 25:32). *“Come, you who are blessed by my Father,”* Jesus says to the sheep. *“Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world”* (Mt 25:34). As the saints go marching in, Paul stands at the gates of heaven and watches as, one by one, those whom he knows and loves are welcomed into their eternal home. Certainly he had known that all the suffering he endured for the sake of the gospel would be worth it, but the magnitude of the glory that he now experiences is unimaginable. After coming through the gates of Heaven, the bride of Christ gathers for the wedding feast. Paul looks over the vast throng gathered and he recognizes many. Whole tables are full of people who came to Christ through his preaching and who persevered in the faith because of his prayers. Paul is beside himself with joy. The glory of the Groom is being revealed to all present and that glory is captivating. But just as captivating to Paul are the faces of his loved ones as they behold the glory of the Lord. Paul looks back to Jesus and sees something on his face as well. It is a joy unlike any he has ever seen. This is the one *who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross* (He 12:2). Paul now shares in that joy.

How about you? What will be your hope, your joy and the crown in which you will glory in the presence of the Lord Jesus when he comes?

***Certainly he had known that suffering for the gospel would be worth it, but the glory that he now experiences is unimaginable***

### ***When Our Lord Jesus Comes with All His Holy Ones***

*May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. -1 Thessalonians 3:13*

What does it mean when the Bible says that Jesus will come with his holy ones? Who are these “holy ones?”

Some believe that Paul is speaking about angels here. They also think Jude is referring to angels when he says, *“See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones”* (Jude 1:14). The main reason for thinking this is the fact that Jesus said, *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him....”* (Mt 25:31). So, there is no doubt that when Jesus returns, he will have angels accompanying him. But the terms that Paul and Jude use are “hagian” and “hagiais,” respectively. These are forms of the Greek word “hagios,” which means “holy.” Even though angels are holy, the problem with thinking that Paul and Jude are talking about angels is that when the term *hagios* or its derivatives stand alone in the New Testament, fifty-nine times they are referring to the saints and not once are they referring to angels. So, Paul (and Jude) could be including angels in their reference to the *holy ones*, but most certainly, he was talking about “the saints.” This idea is borne out, confirmed and made clear later in the letter when he said, *“We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him”* (4:14).

It is only natural that when it comes time for Jesus to return for the church which is alive on earth that God will send along the rest of the church, who are already with him. I know it won’t be literally like this, but imagine the day that the Father convenes the assembly of heaven and says, “I have an announcement to make. Today is the day you have been waiting for. Jesus is returning to earth to bring the remainder of the church to be with us here. Today, for the first time, the entire composition of the eternal church will be united, and for those of you who have recently arrived, you will be reunited with loved ones. I am sending the angels along to gather your brothers and sisters from the four corners of the earth.” Someone speaks up and says, “Father, would it be too presumptuous to ask if I could go along?” Another, then another, express the same desire until the entire company of the saved is asking if they could be part of gathering of the saints in the sky. The Father smiles and says, “Of course, I would have it no other way.”

When Jesus comes back, he is not coming alone. Those who have gone before will be with the Lord to meet us in the air when it is time.

***When Jesus comes back, he is not coming alone***

### ***It Is God's Will That You Should Be Sanctified***

*It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable. -1 Thessalonians 4:3-4*

Most of us want to know what God's will is for our lives. There is something abundantly clear in the Scriptures concerning God's will for you: *That you should be sanctified.*

Being sanctified simply means being holy. This was the calling for the people of God from day one: *I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy* (Lv 11:44). The will of God for his people has never changed in this respect. *Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord* (He 12:14). Because our record of personal holiness has been less than stellar, we tend to write off the idea of genuine holiness as impractical, impossible or reserved for the truly zealous of an age gone by. But what do we do then with the truth of Scripture that it is God's will that we be sanctified? *God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life* (4:7). This is God's will.

***We tend to write off genuine holiness as impractical, impossible or reserved for the truly zealous of an age gone by***

We live with a sense of cognitive dissonance when it comes to holiness. We agree that the Bible teaches that Christians are supposed to live a holy life but we don't know anybody who does—or perhaps very few. So, we don't know how to understand this call to be holy. We turn to our Bible teachers and our commentaries and they give us some mumbo-jumbo about “positional holiness” versus “practical holiness” and, in the end, we don't really believe that it is God's will that we be sanctified.

But hear the word of God again: *It is God's will that you should be sanctified...God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.* It is possible for each person to *learn to control his or her own body in a way that is holy and honorable.* Holy living is something that we have to learn, though I'm not fond of the term “progressive sanctification” because of its implication that we never become truly sanctified. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be fully set apart and consecrated to the purposes of God at any time. The question is, “What percentage of our lives are we living there?” Sergio Scataglini points out that just as you would not drink water that is only 98 percent pure, God has not called us to be 98 percent holy. When you are completely set apart to God you are living in the will of God. When you are not, you are living outside the will of God. And you can live a holy life because it is God's will for you to do so.

### ***The Dead in Christ Will Rise First***

*The dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. -1 Thessalonians 4:16-17*

Perhaps you've seen a painting that depicts the rapture. The Lord Jesus is in the sky. Planes are crashing, buses are careening and ghosts are rising out of their cemetery graves. The part about Jesus in the sky is accurate. The part about the pilot-less vehicles is reasonable. But the part about the spirits of the dead ascending to heaven from their graves is fallacious.

The artist's rendition of the ghosts rising out of the grave is no doubt based on Paul's statement in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 that *the dead in Christ will rise first.* Paul is dealing with a question concerning those who had died (or as the term was coined back then, “fallen asleep”). Paul did not want the Thessalonians to *be ignorant...or to grieve with no hope* (v13). He informs them that when Jesus returns, those who have *fallen asleep in him* (v14) will actually be coming back with the Lord. This is why the idea that the dead in Christ rise out of earthly graves is a fallacy. If those who die in Christ go to be with him—and they do (to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (see 2 Corinthians 5:8 KJV))—then in order to sustain the argument that the dead rise out of their graves, the spirits of those who are with Jesus would be have to be sent to their earthly graves (or wherever it was they met their demise), enter their decomposing, decomposed or nonexistent bodies and then rise to meet the Lord in the air. It makes for good artwork, but bad theology.

***The idea that the dead in Christ rise out of earthly graves is a fallacy***

What then is to be made of the phrase, *the dead in Christ will rise first?* James Earl Massey has pointed out that the word “rise” could just as easily and more accurately have been rendered, “be resurrected.” It is the verb form of Greek word “anastasis,” which always means “resurrection.” The dead in Christ will be resurrected first—not rise like ghosts out of their graves. They are not in their graves, they are with Christ. And that is Paul's point. The Bible refers to a *resurrection at the last day* (Jn 11:24). There will be a general resurrection and judgment of the saved and the unsaved (see John 5:28-29; 1 Corinthians 15:42ff). So, Paul's point is that those who are alive on the earth *will certainly not precede* [in the resurrection] *those who have fallen asleep* (v15). When we meet the Lord at his coming, the saints who have gone on before already have their place with the Lord.

**Test Everything**

*Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. -1 Thessalonians 5:19-22*

I don't like to consider myself a middle-of-the-road kind of guy—it sounds too indecisive. But if the choice is either to blindly reject everything that doesn't fit with your spiritual paradigm for fear of being mistaken or to blindly accept everything that is purportedly from the Spirit for fear of missing him, I choose the middle road. And that is to *test everything*.

I used to run in circles where people were reluctant to go where the Spirit of God was leading for fear of being in error. I now run in circles where too many people assume the Holy Spirit is leading just because someone claims that they heard from God or they heard from someone who heard from someone who heard from God.

In either case, the problem is the failure to test everything. The reluctant in the first

**For a test to be valid there has to be objectivity**

circle are convinced that they are testing everything, but they are not. They do exactly what Paul says should not be done. They *put out the Spirit's fire* and they *treat prophecies with contempt*. How can you test a prophecy if you are treating it with contempt? That's not testing. It's not even scrutinizing. It is exercising a prejudice that will lead to an inevitable conclusion. For a test to be valid there has to be objectivity; there has to be the possibility that something is wrong and there has to be the possibility that something is right about what is being tested. The "reluctant" group has too little room for what could be right concerning much of the work of the Spirit of God.

On the other side of the road are those who throw discernment to the wind and drive headlong into the pursuit of some obscure experience in the Holy Ghost. They don't test everything because they equate testing with unbelief. They are often disinclined to call into question any prophecy for fear that they might *put out the Spirit's fire*. So, they admire the emperor's new clothes when there is really nothing of the Spirit's substance to observe.

So here is Paul's middle of the road: We are not to treat prophecies with contempt but neither are we to believe everything we hear. We must *test everything*. We test everything by the word of God, we look for the fruit (see Matthew 7:16-20) and we discern the witness of the Spirit. These tests are fallible according to our own limitations but, if we apply all three with an ample measure of objectivity, we should be able to know what is and is not from God.

**To the Church of the Thessalonians**

*Paul, Silas and Timothy: To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. -2 Thessalonians 1:1-2*

Have you ever noticed that when Paul wrote to the disciples in a certain city that he did not address his letter to the churches in that city but to the church in that city? And when the Lord sent letters to the seven churches in the province of Asia, each church was singularly addressed according to its city, i.e., *the church in Ephesus*, or *the church in Philadelphia* (Rv 2:1; 3:7). No matter how many different Christian assemblies or denominations there are in the town or city where you live, Jesus has only one church there.

So, the New Testament pattern, without exception, was to recognize only one church in a city (Galatia was a province, not a city). How come?

Was it because each city had only one small assembly? Hardly, the church in Jerusalem numbered in the thousands (see Acts 4:4). The church in Antioch had *great numbers of people* (Ac 11:26). Corinth was a large metropolitan area with many people of God (Ac 18:10).

**No matter how many different Christian assemblies there are in the city where you live, Jesus has only one church there.**

Was it because the entire church in each city was able to come under one roof at any given time? Possibly. We know that the church in Jerusalem used to meet together in the temple courts (see Acts 5:12). But we also know that they met *from house to house* (Ac 5:42).

There were actually two reasons why there was only one church in a city in New Testament times. One was practical and the other theological. In practical terms, church or denominational divisions had not yet made their way onto the ecclesial landscape. If you got saved in Ephesus, you couldn't go to First Presbyterian or Second Baptist. You were part of the church of Ephesus—period. In theological terms, there could not be more than one church because Jesus doesn't have more than one church. He said, *"I will build my church"* (Mt 16:18). That's why when ecclesial divisions started to creep into the church at Corinth, Paul rebuked them for it (see 1 Corinthians 1:10ff).

Does all this mean that I am advocating amalgamating the over five-hundred assemblies in my city into one mega-church? No...but there is still only one church in my city. There is still only *one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father of us all* (Eph 4:5-6). There is only one angel over the church in my city (see Revelation 2:1, 8, 12...).

It will take a city-church to win the city and the more that we can fellowship and work together, the closer we will come to practically being that one church.

### ***Until the Rebellion Occurs***

*We ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed. -2 Thessalonians 2:1-3*

There are certain things that will pre-herald the coming of the Lord. *Wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes* (Mt 24:6-7) are among them. But a sign that we may not consider very often is one that both Paul and Jesus spoke about. It's called *the rebellion*.

The content of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians carries, by percentage, far more about the coming of the Lord than any other of the New Testament letters. It seems that the Thessalonians were more than interested in the subject of the return of the Lord—they were rather uptight about it. Somehow, through someone's newsletter, teaching tapes or website, the Thessalonians had gotten the word that the day of the Lord had already come. But Paul assured the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord, in fact, had not already come. The return of the Lord will not come, Paul says, "*until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed.*"

***"The rebellion" is a serious and widespread apostasy that will take place before the coming of the Lord***

Although *the rebellion* and the revealing of *the man of lawlessness* are two signs that are linked, let's deal with the subject of *the rebellion*. I believe that Paul is referring to the same thing Jesus spoke of when he said "*At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved*" (Mt 24:10-13). Because Jesus is speaking of the end of the age, we can safely assume that this is the explanation of what Paul means by *the rebellion*. The rebellion is a serious and widespread apostasy that will take place before the coming of the Lord. Though some believe that we are currently in *the rebellion*, it seems to me that this is something yet to come, especially if it is an immediate precursor to the return of the Lord. We will see the exponential increase of wickedness and false prophets; the love of most growing cold; many turning away from the faith with apostate believers hating and betraying their former brothers and sisters. These things, plus persecution (see Matthew 24:9) and godlessness (see 2 Timothy 3:1-5) will increase in the last days.

So, get ready. *The rebellion* may soon be upon us.

### ***He Will Strengthen and Protect You from the Evil One***

*Pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. -2 Thessalonians 3:2-3*

The devil is described in the Bible as *a roaring lion looking for someone to devour* (1 Pe 5:8); one who comes to *steal and kill and destroy* (Jn 10:10); and the one *who leads the whole world astray* (Rv 12:9). He is known as our enemy and is obviously a formidable foe. How do we know that we will be protected from our adversary, the devil?

As formidable a foe as he is and as much as he hates us, we should expect full protection from his evil power and wicked scorn. This has to be true because of the clear-cut promises in the Scriptures to that effect. Paul says to the Thessalonians, "*The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.*" Jesus taught us to pray, "*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one*" (Mt 6:13) (the NIV rendering of "evil one" is a far superior translation than the traditional "evil" and I prefer to use it when the Lord's Prayer is recited in public). Not only are we instructed to pray for deliverance for ourselves, Jesus prayed it for us when he said, "*My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one*" (Jn 17:15). Can you doubt for a second that it is the Father's will to answer both Jesus' prayer and ours in this regard? For the one who is born of God, the Bible promises, Jesus will keep safe, *and the evil one does not touch him* (1 Jn 5:18 NASB). Satan is like a chained dog. As long as we stay out of his territory, he won't be able to touch us.

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Paul said that the Lord would not only protect us from the evil one but that he would also strengthen us. When Jesus said, "*I have given you authority...to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you*" (Lk 10:19), he knew that the only weapons left in Satan's arsenal would be lies, accusation, temptation and the actions of others. Because of the blood of Jesus, Satan is no longer able to touch us directly. But we need strength of the Lord to withstand these lies, accusations, temptations and the actions of others.

This may seem a bit oversimplified—the work of the enemy can seem so pervasive—but he is a defeated foe. *No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper* (Is 54:17 NASB) largely because *we are not unaware of his schemes* (2 Co 2:11). The Lord is faithful. He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

**God's Work—Which Is by Faith**

*Command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith. -1 Timothy 1:3-4*

Paul instructed Timothy to stay in Ephesus and take care of some business in the church. Certain men were teaching false doctrines, getting caught up in *myths and endless genealogies*, thus promoting controversies. Controversies have a way of distracting the church from the real work of God. And the real work of God, Paul explains, *is by faith*.

Any and every thing we do for God must be by faith. *Without faith, it is impossible to please God* (He 11:6). All our service, all our giving, all our ministry must be done out of a response to the word and will of God. When our work is a response to what we believe God is calling us to do, then we are operating by faith.

It has to be God's thing, not our own thing, if we want to be involved in God's work. Hopefully, that makes sense to us. God's work is God's work—not something that we come up with. If you come up with an idea to do something for God, how can that be God's work? A house framer doesn't start framing the house according to his own ideas about how the house should be constructed. He follows the blueprint. His work is a response to the pattern that is shown him and the less he deviates from that pattern, the better. This is how Jesus operated. He said, *"The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing"* (Jn 5:19).

By faith, Noah built the ark, Abraham left for the Promised Land and Moses confronted Pharaoh. They heard the voice of God and they obeyed. So God's work works like this: You hear the word of God to do something, and then you do it. What happens, you may ask, if you hear wrong? That's the risk you take. I remember sensing a prompting that I thought was from the Holy Spirit to pull off the highway to visit a friend. I did, but there was no answer at the door. As I walked back to my car, an accusing voice came and mocked me for mishearing the voice of God. "But, at least I obeyed," was my response. And who knows? Maybe it was the voice of God.

It is exciting to do God's work, God's way—by faith. When we walk by faith in obedience to his word, it allows God to perform miracles and it ends up for his glory and not for ours because he is the author and perfecter of that work; work that is by faith—from first to last.

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**I Do Not Permit a Woman to Teach or to Have Authority**

*A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived...But women will be saved through childbearing... -1 Timothy 2:11-15*

Here we have one of the most controversial passages in the New Testament. To say that these five verses have been difficult to explain to our modern western society with its egalitarian values would be an understatement. Those who consider themselves enlightened usually write this passage off as a product of an oppressive and much less enlightened culture, religion or apostle. Christians who consider the Bible the word of God must take a different tack. One of the more common is to explain Paul's comments as a need to address a localized problem in the church at Ephesus where women were perhaps disorderly in the public worship setting and/or exercising authority over their husbands. A second and probably most common approach is to consciously or unconsciously claim ignorance concerning the meaning and application of the passage and continue on with life as usual. And there must be groups, though I have no personal knowledge or experience of them, who take these words at face value and not only prohibit women from teaching or having any authority in the church, but who do not allow them to speak in the public assembly of the saints.

So, what do I think? First of all, it must be admitted that our culture is certainly different from first century Asia Minor. For instance, the biblical practice of women wearing a head covering (see 1 Corinthians 11:6) is not an issue, nor need it be, in our culture. Second, a strict prohibition of women speaking in church does not line up with the biblical endorsement given to women to exercise the gift of prophesy—a gift that is meant to be exercised in church. Third, though "childbearing" is an exceedingly noble calling, today's culture does allow for women to pursue genuine God-ordained ministries other than bearing and caring for children.

With that being said, Paul's reference to the creation and garden accounts as a basis for his arguments must be taken seriously, for such arguments transcend cultural restraints and allowances. Adam was formed first and Eve was created to be a helper. And even though Adam's sin was worse because he knew better Eve was the one deceived, attesting that women are generally more susceptible to deception. Thus, it is generally not natural for women to exercise authority over men

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***The Overseer Must Be...***

*If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be.... -1 Timothy 3:1-2*

Those who want to be *an overseer* desire a noble task. An overseer is one who is given oversight of the church—a role that is synonymous with *elder* and *shepherd* (see Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:1-2). Entrance into this ministry needs to be guarded rather carefully since the welfare of the flock of God is at stake. Therefore, there are twenty-two, or so, qualifications that we find in the New Testament regarding those who will be appointed to be pastors in the church. It is not that anyone has to or even could perfectly satisfy all these requirements for eldership. But at the same time, no one should be appointed as an overseer who currently has a glaring shortfall in any these areas. Consequently, an overseer must be:

- Above reproach. No valid accusation can be brought to discredit trustworthiness to shepherd God's people (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6).
- Faithful to their spouse (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6).
- Temperate (serious minded) (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7).
- Self-controlled (Greek: *sophron*: sound mind/wise) (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8).
- Respectable in conduct and demeanor (1 Timothy 3:2).
- Hospitable (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8).
- Able to teach and guard sound doctrine (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9).
- Not given to addictive behavior (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- Not violent (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- Gentle (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- Not quarrelsome (Greek: *amachel*: not using a sword) (1 Timothy 3:3).
- Free from greed and the love of money, gaining an honest income (1 Timothy 3:3; 1 Peter 5:2; Titus 1:7).
- Managing their family well/obedient children (1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6).
- Not a recent convert (1 Timothy 3:6).
- Having a good reputation outside of the church (1 Timothy 3:7).
- Not overbearing in needing to always have their way (Titus 1:7).
- Not quick-tempered (Titus 1:7).
- Lovers of what is good while hating what is evil (Titus 1:8; Romans 12:9).
- Upright/having integrity (Titus 1:8).
- Holy (Greek: "*Hosios*." Someone or something that is consecrated to the Lord) (Titus 1:8).
- Disciplined (Titus 1:8).
- Eager to serve (1 Timothy 3:1; 1 Peter 5:2).

***Don't Let Anyone Look Down on You***

*Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. -1 Timothy 4:12*

Paul told Timothy, who was an overseer with apostolic authority in the church at Ephesus, "*Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young.*" Good advice. Young people are often not afforded the respect they deserve. But Paul's advice can be applied to more than young people. Whoever you are, it is never appropriate to let people look down on you.

A simple study of the Greek word that Paul uses regarding people "looking down" on Timothy is interesting and fruitful. The word is "kataphroneo." It is a combination of two words. "Kata," when used in the particular case it is here, means "against." "Phroneo," means "to think." So, literally, kataphroneo means "to think against." It is used nine times in the New Testament. The KJV translates it "to despise." The NIV uses "despise" plus, "to show contempt," "to disrespect," "to scorn" and of course, "to look down on." It is the same word used in Matthew's and Luke's gospels when it says; *No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other* (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13). The idea is that you are thinking against someone or something in your mind. You are not for them; you are against them. You are not accepting them; you are rejecting them.

***True humility has nothing to do with living under someone else's judgments***

Timothy was told by his father in the faith to not allow people to disrespect him for his youth. We should not let people look down on us regarding something for which we need not be ashamed. To allow people look down on you, because you are young—or any other unfounded reason—is not productive. I attended a racially integrated high school in Chicago in the seventies where the rallying cries among the Afro-American students were, "Black is Beautiful," and "I am Somebody." It was a healthy thing. It was a needed thing. No longer were they going to let people look down on them because they were black. Did Jesus let people look down on him? No.

How do we not let people look down on us? Two ways: One is to not to subject and submit ourselves to their thinking which is against us. True humility has nothing to do with living under someone else's judgments. Two, we must, as Paul instructed Timothy, set an example *in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity* (remember Martin Luther King Jr.) to counter those judgments.

Self-respect is a good thing so *don't let anyone look down on you.*