

## **The Church as God’s Missional People: Regenerate Membership and Church Discipline Lived Out in Those Justified by His Grace**

Ecclesiology and missiology are intrinsically related to one another. The only way to do biblical missions is to do so through a biblical church, and the only way to be a biblical church is to pursue faithfully God’s mission for the church as revealed in Holy Scripture. In light of this symbiotic relationship, I believe there is a connection between regenerate church membership and church discipline, on the one hand, and the missional nature of God’s church, on the other hand. In order to demonstrate this, I will (1) address the missional nature of the church; (2) discuss the relationship between regenerate church membership and church discipline and the concept of a missional church; and (3) offer four ways in which membership and discipline enhance the missional nature of God’s church. All of this will be examined within the context of a people who have been justified by grace through the blood atonement of Jesus.

### **1) The Missional Nature of the Church**

“Missional” simply denotes that something is related to or characterized by mission. It denotes a certain posture or impulse among Christians and churches, whereby one sees oneself as a missionary regardless of their particular vocation or geographic location.<sup>1</sup> The adjective “missional” helps the church to capture a broad and comprehensive vision for her mission, one that connects our theology to our missiology, our understanding of the Bible’s grand redemptive

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<sup>1</sup>It is recognized that many using this term do not share orthodox, theological convictions. This is the central concern of K. Eitel’s article, “Shifting to the First Person: On Being Missional,” *Occasional Bulletin: Evangelical Missiological Society* 22, no. 1 (2000): 1–4. J. Leeman has also challenged us to consider that many proponents of the term “missional” fill that term with objectionable meaning. He argues that some people using the term “missional” emphasize social justice in a way that fosters a new liberalism, and for others, the use of “missional” leads to “a small view of God,” “an inconsequential view of Hell,” “a de-emphasis on conversion,” and a “reductionistic Biblical storyline” (see Jonathan Leeman, “Is the God of the Missional Gospel Too Small?” in *9Marks Journal*, <http://www.9marks.org/ejournal/new-evangelical-liberalism>, accessed January 28, 2010).

narrative to the church's specific mission. In order to provide theological context, it is helpful to speak of 1) the mission of God, 2) the mission of God's people, and 3) the mission of God's people to the nations.<sup>2</sup> These three golden threads will guide us as we seek to trace out the relationship of a justified, regenerate church membership and church discipline, to the missional nature of the church. What follows is a brief explanation of these three threads. After describing them, our attention will return to the second thread for it is most relevant to the purpose of this paper.

### ***Three Golden Threads of Mission***

The first thread is *the mission of God*. God Himself is the initiator and director of the church's mission. His mission is revealed in the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. The biblical narrative reveals that the eternal Triune God created this world from nothing (Gen 1:1). He created and continues to fill His world with His image bearers from whom He will make a kingdom of priests. The world He created reflects His glory and points continually to Him, while the image-bearers He created are given the responsibility of subduing and ruling the earth for His glory (Genesis 1–2). God's first image-bearers, however, sinned against Him, setting themselves up as autonomous. In so doing, they alienated themselves from God, each other, and the rest of the created order (Genesis 3). As a result, they died spiritually

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<sup>2</sup>There is some repetition in our second and third threads: "the mission of God's people" and "the mission of God's people to the nations." In fact, the mission of God's people to the nations is a subset of "the mission of God's people." However, it is still important to note both threads as we unpack the theological context for our use of "missional" for two reasons: (1) Sometimes the word "missional" is used in such a way that it detracts from the call to cross-cultural and cross-linguistic missions. The emphasis is on asking people to live missionally within their own zip code while overlooking the call of God's people to reach the nations. (2) In highlighting the church's mission to the nations, we hope to provide a reminder that central to the biblical narrative is God's call for the gospel to be sent to the nations and His promise that people from every tribe will gather together at the end of time to worship Jesus Christ, their Savior and King (Revelation 5, 7).

and all their offspring are dead in their trespasses. Thus, the good world God created was marred by the ugliness of sin, the consequences of which are far more pervasive than most typically imagine (Rom 1:18–3:20).

In the aftermath of man's rebellion, God immediately promised to send a Savior, one born of a woman (Gen 3:15), one who would crush the serpent's head, justify sinners, redeem the nations and restore God's good world. Indeed, from the third chapter of Genesis onward, the Scriptures bear witness to the triumphant march of God who accomplished the redemption He promised through the Savior. The Savior came, was crucified to pay the debt that we could not pay, rose from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He will return again, bringing with Him a new heavens and earth, where the redeemed of the nations will worship Him forever and ever. This overarching biblical narrative is singular and unsubstitutable in its ability to reveal God's mission to redeem and reconcile His good creation.

The second thread is *the mission of God's people*, which is set firmly in the context of God's mission. The church finds itself between the time when God sent His Son to purchase redemption and the time when He will gather the redeemed of the nations and create the heavens and earth anew. We the church bear witness to the Sent One, to glorify Him in both word and deed. Just as He will return one day to receive the worship of the redeemed and to restore His good creation, so the church's mission includes both redemptive and creational aspects.<sup>3</sup> In its primary and redemptive aspect, the church is *sent* to bear witness to the gospel in word and deed so that she may be an agent of grace to a corrupt, lost and dying world. In its secondary and

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<sup>3</sup> It is fitting that the book of Revelation encapsulates both the redemptive and creational aspects. Revelation 5 speaks to the redemption of men and women from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, while Rev 4:11 and Revelation 21–22 speak to the restoration of God's good creation, as he provides a new heavens and earth.

creational aspect, the church is *shaped* by the biblical narrative and its attendant Christian worldview.<sup>4</sup> In other words, in every aspect of the life of a local church, in every *vocatio* in which a believer finds himself, and in every dimension of society and culture in which God's people find themselves, God, His gospel, and His Word are the shaping forces. Although the church is not herself ushering in God's kingdom in the creational aspect of her mission, she is a sign, a witness, of the kingdom to come and a foreshadowing of a new heavens and earth. A church is missional, therefore, to the extent that she allows herself to be both sent and shaped by God.

The third thread is *the mission of God's people to the nations*. Throughout the Scriptures, God makes it clear that He will glorify himself among the nations. In Solomon's prayer (2 Chr 6:12–7:3), for example, we learn that God will make known to the nations His great name, His strong hand, and His outstretched arm. In Psalm 67, we learn of a God who will make His salvation known among all the nations and to whom all the peoples of the earth will give their praise. The Psalmist writes, "May God be gracious to us and bless us; look on us with favor so that Your way may be known on earth, Your salvation among all nations. Let the nations praise You, God; let all the peoples praise You. Let the nations rejoice and shout for joy, for You judge the peoples with fairness and lead the nations on earth" (vv. 1–4). In Matthew's Gospel we find our Lord commanding us to take the gospel to the nations (Matt 28:18–20), while in Luke's we

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<sup>4</sup> We employ the terms "sent" and "shape" to distinguish between the life of the church, on the one hand, that bears witness to the gospel to the lost and dying world and on the other hand, that reflects God's work of redemption in their lives and works out the implications of the gospel in every dimension of culture. The notion of the church being "shaped by God's redemptive work" underscores that when the church lives for the good of culture, they do so because they have been "recreated" (Eph 2:10) by the redemptive mission of God. We owe this insight to Keith Whitfield, who uses "directed," "shaped," and "sent" to offer a robust explanation of what it means to be missional (see K. Whitfield, "What is the Missional Gospel? Part 7: Concluding Thoughts, Challenge to Define, and Timely Question," <http://betweenthehours.com/2010/03/24/what-is-the-missional-gospel-part-7-concluding-thoughts-challenge-to-define-and-timely-question/>, accessed July 26, 2010).

find Him promising that His name will be preached to all nations (Luke 24:46–49). In Revelation, we are given a glimpse of those redeemed worshippers from among every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Revelation 5, 7). John says the number is so great he could not number them. This is a missionary promise that should challenge and comfort us as we take the gospel to the nations. These passages and numerous others make clear God’s mission to redeem worshippers from every people and nation in His good creation. The heart of the church’s mission to the nations is to make disciples by preaching Christ and Him crucified for their justification and to catalyze the formation of biblical churches among those disciples. Further, her mission is to teach all things Christ commanded, bequeathing to the nations a desire to submit to Scripture in all things and to work out the implications of a Christian worldview in all aspects of society and culture. This thread is no minor thread but is prominent throughout the biblical narrative. The unity of the peoples and nations is not a social issue; it is a “blood of Christ” issue. God ordained the crucifixion of His Son in order that the nations might be purchased by His blood, justified by His grace, and brought together as the one people of God.

God has woven these golden threads deeply into the tapestry of the biblical narrative. To remove any of the three threads is to distort the overall picture: God’s mission—to win the nations and to reconcile all things to Himself—frames the mission of God’s people. The mission of God’s people, in both its redemptive and creational aspects, frames her mission to the nations.<sup>5</sup> Mission, therefore, begins with God and ends with God. He organizes, energizes, directs, and culminates it for His glory and the good of the nations.

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<sup>5</sup> By this, we do not mean that our international missionaries will pay the same attention to the cultural mandate that they will to their evangelistic mandate. It is our opinion that vocational missionaries should focus their energies on making disciples through evangelism and church planting, and in particular doing so among unreached people groups. However, the churches that we plant should seek to glorify God in every conceivable manner among

### *Revisiting the Second Thread*

There are clear missional implications for church membership and church discipline. These two biblical practices are essential marks of a healthy New Testament church and affect the missional nature of the church by shaping the life of the church in accordance with God's purposes for her. This in turn affects the *sentness* of the church. The church, as a spiritual family, is *sending* a people who are in covenant relationship with other believers and a people who are accountable to others for the way they live their lives. The church is shaped and sent to represent the power of the gospel to transform the lives of people and to represent the sovereign and messianic reign of Jesus Christ. The church is not only the agent but also the product of the same process. The church, Richard Bauckham writes,

should be the community from which the blessing of Abraham, experienced in Jesus, overflows to others. The church should be the people who have recognized God as he truly is in God's revelation in Jesus and therefore make that revelation known to others. The church is those people who, so far, acknowledge God's rule as he is implementing it in Jesus and live for others in the light of the coming of his kingdom in all creation.<sup>6</sup>

God's mission, as rendered by the biblical narrative, gives shape to the life and values of the church itself. The church is a product of God's mission, for the church is redeemed by God and for God. The church is called to live its life in light of the gospel of God.

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their people group. These churches' efforts, therefore, would optimally include efforts to work out the implications of the gospel in every dimension of their respective societies and cultures.

<sup>6</sup> R. Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 49.

Indeed, the church's life is to be shaped by the already-and-not-yet kingdom of God so that it may be a foreshadowing of the new heavens and earth. As Paul makes clear, God's people live in a "new age" inaugurated by Christ (Eph 4:17–24) and are called to live in a cruciform fashion, in a manner shaped by the reality of this new age. Perhaps Paul captures this most poignantly in 2 Corinthians 5. In this passage, Paul calls those in Christ a "new creation" (v. 17).

The portrait of the newly created life is found in vv. 14–16:

For Christ's love compels us, since we have reached this conclusion: if One died for all, then all died. And He died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the One who died for them and was raised. From now on, then, we do not know anyone in a purely human way. Even if we have known Christ in a purely human way, yet now we no longer know Him like that. (HCSB)

For the people of God, living in this age means that they live in light of the reality of what God has done for them through Jesus Christ. This life is depicted as a "controlled life" (v. 14), as a life lived for Christ who died for us (v. 15), and as a life lived for everyone (v. 16). It is a life lived out of the reality that we have been regenerated (v. 17), reconciled (18) and made righteous (v. 21).

As she is shaped by God, the church is *sent* by God as ambassadors and ministers of reconciliation. She is sent as a redemptive agent of God's grace to proclaim the gospel in word and deed to the lost. The church is sent to do so in its own cultural context, but also cross-culturally among the tribes, tongues, peoples, and nations (John 20:21; Revelation 5).

Throughout the Scriptures, God makes clear that He will make Himself known to the nations and will do so through a redeemed, justified, reconciled, and sanctified people—the church.

## 2) Regenerate Church Membership, Church Discipline, and the Missional Church

The Christian Scriptures emphasize the primacy of God's church, particularly in its local expression, in fulfilling His mission. This church is called to reflect the glory of God and His grace and to proclaim the goodness of His salvation in Christ Jesus (Eph 1:21–22, 3:10). Scripture does not give a dictionary definition of the nature of the church. Instead, it provides images and analogies that help us to understand the nature of the church, though there are definite marks which help us identify a healthy body of believers.<sup>7</sup> The church cannot be defined apart from its relationship to God, which is evident especially in three particular scriptural images.

Peter describes the church as the *people of God* (1 Pet 2:9–10), which serves to remind us that we are God's possession, and that we are a community rather than a collection of individuals. Paul instructs us that we are the *body of Christ*. Sometimes he uses this image to refer to the church universal (Eph 4:1–16; Col 1:18) and sometimes to the church local (Rom 12:4–8, 1 Cor 12:27). This image helps us to understand that we are many members but one body (unity and diversity) and that each of us belong to the other members of the body (mutual love and interdependence). Finally, both Peter and Paul speak of the church as the *temple of the Spirit*. The church is the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16), our body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19); we as living stones are being built into a spiritual house (1 Pet 2:5). This image not only evokes the memory of Christ who “tabernacles” with us (John 1:14), but also the idea of relationship. We are held together by the Spirit.

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<sup>7</sup> See M. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000).



Furthermore, in attempting to build a biblically faithful ecclesiology, the church itself has articulated certain “marks” of God’s church. The early church fathers noted that the church was marked by oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. We affirm that the church is *one* in that it holds to one gospel and this unity is manifested in tangible ways such as church members loving one another, and churches forming associations in order to cooperate with one another. The church is *holy* because her members have been justified by faith in Christ and this holiness is manifested optimally in the practice of regenerate church membership. The church is *catholic*, in that her gospel is universally accessible to anybody at any time and in any place who will believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. To believe this gospel is to become a part of the one body of Christ. The church is *apostolic*, not in the sense of apostolic succession, but rather in the continuity of apostolic gospel teaching.<sup>8</sup>

The Reformers affirmed the four patristic marks of the church, but noted that they applied more to the “invisible church” (an unhelpful phrase) than the visible.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, they provided two additional marks of the church, the right preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments. The church rightly preaches the Word in that she accurately proclaims the gospel. If a community of believers is not preaching the true gospel in its essence and implications, it is not a Christian church. The church properly administers the Lord’s Supper and baptism in a manner that is consonant with the gospel as presented in Scripture. Calvin writes that “wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments

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<sup>8</sup> For an evangelical Baptist evaluation of the patristic marks, see J. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 51–62.

<sup>9</sup> We are not fond of the “invisible” and “visible” nomenclature when applied to the church. An invisible church is something of an oxymoron. The language of “universal” and “local” church is more helpful.

administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."<sup>10</sup>

Baptists affirm the patristic and Reformation marks of the church, but insist that a true church is also marked by regenerate church membership (1 Cor 5:11) and a disciplined body (Matt 18:15–18; 1 Cor 6:1–11). Only believers may be members of the church. “To put it simply,” writes John Hammett, “regenerate church membership is meaningful church membership, involving only those with a genuine commitment to Christ and the congregation of Christ's people.”<sup>11</sup> This belief is the center of Baptist ecclesiology and a faithful reflection of New Testament teaching and is directly linked to the purposes of the church and its mission.<sup>12</sup>

Through regenerate church membership and church discipline, the church has a way to designate those who are truly God's people. While, on this side of eternity, we will never know for sure the state of another person's soul, we must keep diligent watch over the church, discipling and disciplining toward the goals of faithfulness and holiness. The natural complement to regenerate church membership is church discipline. Though church discipline is sometimes practiced by those who do not practice regenerate church membership, church discipline follows naturally from the doctrine of regenerate church membership. In the practice of church discipline, members who are living a life contrary to the transforming power of the gospel

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<sup>10</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 21:1023 (4.1.9). For an evangelical Baptist exposition of the Reformation marks, see M. E. Dever, “The Church,” in Daniel L. Akin, ed., *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 778–91.

<sup>11</sup> Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 82.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 81. See also J. D. Freeman, “The Place of Baptists in the Christian Church,” in *The Baptist World Congress: London, July 11–19, 1905, Authorised Record of Proceedings* (London: Baptist Union Publication Department, 1905), 27; Justice C. Anderson, “Old Baptist Principles Reset,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 31 (Spring 1989): 5–12; and Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 136.

(regeneration) are called to repent and live in accordance with the gospel or else be separated from the church. In order for regenerate church membership to be maintained in the church in any viable sense, church discipline must be exercised as well.

In fact, regenerate church membership and church discipline are part of God's intention to shape or structure the church in such a way that it complements the gospel and is prepared for missions. This is Jonathan Leeman's thesis in *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*.<sup>13</sup> In his introductory remarks and throughout the book, he makes two significant points bearing upon this paper. First, the doctrines of regenerate church membership and church discipline are based upon the reality of gospel transformation in salvation (Titus 3:4–7). Second, these two practices of the church proclaim and reflect God's love to the world. God's love for the world is on display in the gospel as it is proclaimed and lived out.<sup>14</sup> It is on display in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). It is on display in the justifying and regenerating power of the gospel (Rom 3:21–31; Eph 2:4–5). It is on display as the people of God experience the gospel hope that never leaves them disappointed (Rom 5:5). The way that the church functions is a direct outworking of what the church is, but even more significantly, the way the church functions is a direct outworking of what the gospel is, for the gospel gives birth to the church (regeneration) and shapes the life of the church (discipleship).

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<sup>13</sup> J. Leeman, *The Church and The Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–36. Leeman writes, "Insofar as the gospel presents the world with the most vivid picture of God's love, and insofar as church membership and discipline are an implication of the gospel, local church membership and discipline in fact define God's love for the world. That, in one sentence, is the argument of this book" (17). A person who believes this is one who believes that "God has mandated one structure in the Bible rather than another, that this structure perfectly matches the message itself, almost as if it were an organic outgrowth of the message, like DNA producing a body's skeleton, and that it's precisely this structure that God means to use to accomplish the organization's purpose—to define his love for the world" (16).

God purchased the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28, cp. Eph 5:23), He creates the church through the gospel (1 Pet 2:9, cp. Eph 2:10, 2 Cor 5:17), He gives life to the church through the regenerating power of the gospel (Heb 13:20, cp. Eph 2:4), He establishes the church in the person and work of Jesus Christ, He empowers her by the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:19–22, 1 Cor. 12:13). Understandably, then, Paul calls the church to live lives in conformity to the gospel (Phil 1:21). In Col 3:12, for example, Paul says, “...put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” Because the church is defined by its relation to Christ and lives under His authority, its members are actually connected to one another.<sup>15</sup> Our union with Christ connects us not only to God but also one to another. This is evident especially in the Lord’s Supper and in the “one another” commands scattered throughout the New Testament. We must be in agreement with one another (Rom 12:16; 15:5), accepting one another and forgiving one another (Col 3:13), not arguing about doubtful issues (Rom 14:1). We must warn those who are lazy, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient with everyone (1 Thess 5:14), have the same concern for each other (1 Cor 12:25), and be of the same mind (2 Cor 13:11). Perhaps all of the many “one another” commands could be summed up in 1 Thess 5:15: “See to it that no one repays evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all.” Only a justified, regenerate, reconciled and disciplined church can live in this manner.

These commands are given to all of the members of the church. It is not just the leaders who are responsible for the church. Rather, we are all responsible to one another, and ultimately to Christ. The church is congregational (Acts 6:3; 13:2–3; 15:22). While recognizing Christ as the ultimate divine authority, we recognize the congregation as the human authority. We follow

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<sup>15</sup> For a helpful theological and philosophical reflection of this point, see Leeman, 127–68.

Christ as he leads the church. This is not at odds with the appointment of pastors, to whose leadership we should gladly and willingly submit, unless for doctrinal or moral reasons their leadership is rescinded (1 Tim 5:17–25; Heb 13:7, 17).

### **3) How Church Membership and Church Discipline Enhance the Missional Nature of the Church**

The biblical teaching, therefore, is that regenerate membership is at the center of a biblical concept of the church. This is revealed perhaps most strikingly in prominent biblical images of the church, which reveal that the church is “a people who” more than it is “a place where.” The church is the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit. The corporate church is composed of individuals who themselves are persons (people of God), members (body of Christ), and stones (temple of the Spirit). Scripture makes clear that one should be able to look at this “people who” and see God and His gospel. God’s people are told to live honorably “in everyone’s eyes” (Rom 12:17) and to make known God’s wisdom “to the rulers and authorities in the heavens” (Eph 3:10). They are instructed to be blameless, living as “stars in the world” (Phil 2:14–15) and to live quietly and reputably in the home and in the workplace so that they may “walk properly in the presence of outsiders and not be dependent on anyone” (1 Thess 4:10–12). In sum, they are to conduct themselves honorably so that the world will see their lives and “glorify God in a day of visitation” (1 Pet 2:12).

For this reason, perhaps it is helpful to talk of the church being a “window” to God, to His gospel, and to His kingdom purposes.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, if this window is to provide an

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<sup>16</sup> Various theologians and missiologists have used this or similar images to refer to God’s intentions for Israel and/or the church. C. Wright writes of Israel, “The whole history of Israel, we might say, is intended to be the shop window for the knowledge of God in all the earth” (C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006], 127). Likewise, W. Simson writes of the church, “Jesus has given us the commission to go and

undistorted and unobstructed view of God, regenerate membership and loving discipline are vital. Membership is God’s design for His local bodies to be communities of justified, regenerate men and women who are committed to trusting, loving, and obeying Him, and making His name known. Discipleship and church discipline are His chosen arms for “cleaning the glass” so that the window provides a clear picture of God, His gospel, and His kingdom.<sup>17</sup> They are His preferred way to cultivate the life and health of the church.

In particular, God uses discipleship and discipline to cultivate the life of the church by fostering four essential characteristics: (1) a God-centered and supernatural view of salvation; (2) a gospel-shaped community; (3) gospel-shaped disciples; and (4) a clear and unconfused gospel testimony.

### ***A God-centered and Supernatural View of Salvation***

The spiritual life of the church is *from* God and *for* God. Regenerate church membership testifies that it is *from* God, and church discipline helps shape the church to live *for* God. Marking out the church with regenerate church membership and discipline suggests something about the aim of the church, about its call to pursue the Great Commission. These two church practices shape the church by establishing the church’s identity, foundation, and function, which in turn positions the church to become a church that accomplishes God’s purposes. Christopher Wright says,

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make disciples of all nations. It is the growing conviction of many Christians around the world that this will only ever be achieved by having a church—God’s shop window—within walking distance of every person on the globe” (W. Simson, *Houses that Change the World* [Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2003], xxvi–xxvii).

<sup>17</sup> This is why they have been called “central to” and “powerful tools for” evangelism and mission (see T. Chester and S. Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2008], 55; Dever, *Nine Marks*, 176).

So all our missional efforts to make God known must be set within the prior framework of God's own will to be known. We are seeking to accomplish what God himself wills to happen. This is both humbling and reassuring. It is humbling inasmuch as it reminds us that all our efforts would be in vain but for God's determination to be known. We are neither the initiators of the mission of making God known to the nations nor does it lie in our power to decide how the task will be fully accomplished or when it may be deemed to be complete. But it is reassuring. For we know that behind all our fumbling efforts and inadequate communication stands the supreme will of the living God, reaching out in loving self-revelation, incredibly willing to open blind eyes and reveal his glory through the treasures of the gospel delivered in the clay pots of his witnesses (2 Cor. 4:1–7).<sup>18</sup>

God himself is the initiator, organizer, and enabler of salvation. Therefore, He and He alone is the Lord over the church's mission. He builds His church and gives her life through His gospel (from God) and calls her to be His witness to and among the nations (for God).

### *A Gospel-Shaped Community*

Jesus proclaimed a kingdom, providing the first fruits of it in His resurrection, but in the wake of His ascension what arose was not a kingdom, but a church! The reason for this is both simple and profound. The church is His bride who will dwell forever with Him in His kingdom (in a new heavens and earth) and is furthermore His chosen community of mission. We are a sign

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<sup>18</sup>Wright, *Mission of God*, 129–30.

of His kingdom, called to bear witness to Him and His gospel by our proclamation and presence. Indeed, we exist for the very purpose of bearing witness to our Bridegroom and King.

The church, God’s gospel-shaped community of presence and proclamation, is central to God’s plan. This is why most of the New Testament epistles were written to communities (even Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Philemon are ultimately for communities). It is difficult, if not impossible, to read and apply the Bible outside of community. God gave the Great Commission to a group of people, He told a group of people to wait for the Spirit, and now He calls a group of people, the church, to be His community of mission. It is this community that gives shape to our lives as believers and this community that provides the matrix within which we proclaim the gospel and fulfill the ministries of the church.<sup>19</sup> It is this community which “presents a picture of our new communal identities in Christ and then gives further shape to those new identities.”<sup>20</sup> For this reason, the Bible repeatedly uses communal language. We are called into fellowship with the Son (1 Cor 1:9) through the Spirit (2 Cor 3:3). We share our lives and possessions (Acts 2:44–45), share in responsibility to edify the church (1 Corinthians 12, Eph 4:1–16), and share in the call to make known the gospel of King Jesus (Eph 3:10; Phil 1:5; 2:14).

In other words, God has wed himself to a community who is to be a faithful presence in the world continually proclaiming and pointing to Him. James Davidson Hunter’s *To Change the World* is particularly helpful in unpacking the redeemed community’s relation to the world. For him, the logic at the heart of the church’s witness is that God’s faithful presence to the church drives her to be faithfully present to Him in return: “We are present to God as a worshipping

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<sup>19</sup> Chester and Timmis provide a helpful discussion of how the concept of community shapes the church’s evangelism, social involvement, church planting, world mission, and so forth (*Total Church*, 53–202).

<sup>20</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 135.



community; fully present through participation in the sacraments, collective adoration, repentance, contemplation, intercession, devotion, and service.” And again, “Only by being fully present to God as a worshipping community and as adoring followers can we be faithfully present in the world.”<sup>21</sup> Further, Hunter argues, this community’s presence is particularly salient in a later modern world skeptical about the relation of human language to the world of reality, of religious words to religious reality. According to Hunter, it is all the more incumbent upon us to build a theology of faithful presence, which will include at least two essential lessons for our time:

The first is that *incarnation is the only adequate reply to the challenges of dissolution; the erosion of trust between word and world and the problems that attend it.* From this follows the second: *it is the way the Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ and the purposes to which the incarnation was directed that are the only adequate reply to challenge of difference.* For the Christian, if there is a possibility for human flourishing in a world such as ours, it begins when God’s word of love becomes flesh in us, is embodied in us, is enacted through us and in doing so, a trust is forged between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks; to the words we speak and the realities to which we, the church, point. In all, presence and place matter decisively.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> J. D. Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 244. Reflecting on the missional nature of the reformational marks of the church, M. Horton makes a similar argument. He rightly warns that the temptation for Reformed Christians is to be proud of being a part of a true and/or healthy church, regardless of whether people are being saved and added to the church. It is easy, he says, to forget that confession of faith, sacraments, and sound doctrine all exists for the mission of God (see M. Horton, “Why the Marks of the Church Need the Mission,” [www.wscal.edu/conference/missionalandreformed/ why\_marks\_need\_the\_mission2.php], accessed June 28, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

Just as God has been present to us, we are called to be present to Him as a worshipping community, and in so doing we are a window to God for the world.

### ***Gospel-shaped Disciples***

Godliness is fundamental to the church's mission and to the effectiveness of her missional efforts. Thus, godliness is missional, for the Scripture teaches that the lives of God's people are windows through which the world sees the gospel and its glorious power to transform lives. Paul instructs the church through Titus that their lives should show off the glory of the gospel (Titus 2:9–10, cp. Phil 1:27, 1 Pet 2:12).

We want to emphasize, however, that regenerate and disciplined church members are not godly *merely* or even *primarily* as a strategic tool for the sake of mission. Godliness is not a tool to be used in the hands of Christians to accomplish God's purpose in the world. In fact, when godliness is used in a merely instrumental manner, it is contrary to the very nature of godliness and often devolves into legalism or license. Instead, we are to view godliness primarily as a Christian's identity and as union with Christ. Godliness is God's purpose for our lives, accomplished for His glory but also for our good and for the good of a watching world.

The church should be instructed toward godliness because of its calling. The church is saved for God, and He is making us holy and blameless (Rom 8:29–30, Eph 1:4, 1 Pet 1:13–21). Holiness is on display in the life of the church when we no longer live for ourselves and for the world. It is on glorious display when we live for Jesus, the one who saves us (2 Cor 5:15). Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw the crucial nature of this when he wrote, "Nothing can be more cruel

than that leniency which abandons others to sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than that severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one's community back from the path of sin."<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, the call to holiness is a reminder of two important aspects of the church. First, holiness is God's work and He begins it in our justification and regeneration. Second, holiness is the aim of the church's life, an end toward which it strives, and a reminder that ongoing discipleship is needed in the church.

In this manner, regenerate church membership and discipline return into view. We are reminded again that we might think of regenerate church membership and discipline as cultivating the church so that genuine disciples will flourish in it. Such disciples would follow the call of Jesus and obey all he has commanded. This would include the development of Christian character and formation of the fruit of the Spirit. Chester and Timmis write,

Jesus commanded his disciples to go and disciple the nations by teaching them to obey all that he had commanded. The reason we fail to respond to that exhortation is not that the commands of Jesus are hard to comprehend. The most significant obstacle in the interpretive process is sin! This is precisely why discipleship is essential.<sup>24</sup>

Godliness, therefore, is part of our identity in Christ. It is an overflow of our union with Christ. It is a window to God and His life-transforming gospel. It drives us to make disciples of all nations, to be truly missional Christians.

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<sup>23</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together / Prayer Book of the Bible* in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 5, ed. G. B. Kelly, trans. D. W. Bloesch and J. H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 105.

<sup>24</sup> Chester and Timmis, *Total Church*, 121.

### *A Clear and Unconfused Gospel Testimony*

Meaningful membership and discipline give reasonable assurance that our church's members can and will give testimony to Christ. Thom Rainer has pointed out that this has clear implications for proclaiming the gospel: "An unregenerate person cannot share his or her experience of the redemptive power of Christ."<sup>25</sup> Although this observation is obvious, it is worth making. The Great Commission is our Lord's call to a certain group of people, His bride, His disciples. These disciples seek to fulfill the Great Commission from a new standing, for Christ-followers have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God (Col 1:13–14). The testimony of the church at Thessalonica is a picture of this reality. The Scriptures tell us that the report they had turned from idols to serve the living God "rang out" from them (1 Thess 1:8–9).

The testimony of the church is not to the moral uprightness of its members, but to the power of God's gospel to justify sinners and change lives. The testimony is to the reality that God has done a regenerating work in people's lives through Jesus Christ. When the church does not practice covenant membership with regenerate people, the church becomes a testimony to something else, a testimony perhaps to the quality of the programming, the skill of the leadership, the common interests of the people, or to social and moral conformity. Whatever it is, it is not a testimony to what God has done in someone's life to justify and convert them. But, because regenerate church membership entails that there is a clear and unconfused testimony in

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<sup>25</sup>T. Rainer, "A Resurgence Not Yet Fulfilled," in *The Great Commission Resurgence* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 41. He cites a 2005 study that he did where he asked 315 church members two questions: (1) "If you died today, do you know for certain that you would go to heaven?," and (2) "If God were to ask you why He should let you into heaven, when would you say?" The results of his survey reveal that 45 percent of church members are not (31 percent) or may not (14 percent) be Christians.

the gospel before one joins the church, every new member joined to the church is a witness to the church that God, through the gospel, continues to call people to salvation as He justifies unworthy sinners by grace thru faith in Jesus.

Church discipline serves to complement church membership and its testimony to God's life changing work. Church discipline is founded on the conviction that those who have been born again by the power of the gospel will live lives in conformity to the gospel. Over time the transforming work of the Spirit will lead Christians to take off old patterns of life and put on new gospel patterns of life (Colossians 3). When this process is not evident and sin begins to take root in people's lives, the Scriptures call us to confront them with their sin (Gal 6:1–2), because the church is a body of people who are being transformed by the gospel.

### **Conclusion**

Church membership and discipline, therefore, are not disconnected from the church's witness. Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the significance of ecclesiology for mission in particular. We must agree with Mark Dever, who writes,

The enduring authority of Christ's commands compels Christians to study the Bible's teaching on the church. Present-day errors in the understanding and the practice of the church will, if they prevail, still further obscure the gospel. Christian proclamation might make the gospel audible, but Christians living together in local congregations make the gospel visible (John 13:34–35). The church is the gospel made visible.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dever, "The Church," 767.

Church membership and discipline make the gospel visible by fostering 1) a God-centered and supernatural view of salvation, 2) gospel-shaped disciples, 3) a gospel-shaped community, and 4) a clear and unconfused gospel testimony. In these ways, regenerate membership and discipline are profoundly connected to the church's ability to provide a clear and unobstructed window to God and His gospel.