

A F R I C A  
T H E O L O G Y  
S E R I E S

The Doctrine of the Church



Jones Ndzi  
Coye Still III



# The Doctrine of the Church

Jones Ndzi  
Coye Still, III



NIAMEY : NIGER

*THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH*  
Africa Theology Series

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# INTRODUCTION TO ATS

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The Africa Theology Series is a multi-volume series of books on Christian Theology. Unlike a typical systematic theology, each book in this series is a stand alone volume on a specific topic or doctrine. Also, unlike a traditional systematic theology, this series expands the scope to include biblical, systematic and applied theology. The goal is to give the African church a biblically faithful and contextually appropriate tool to help them, as Jude 3 states, “Content for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Briefly introducing such a comprehensive work like the Africa Theology Series poses quite a challenge which is why an entire separate volume is devoted to introducing the series. In that first and key volume, the reader is provided with a foundation for all the subsequent volumes. This introductory volume explains the uniqueness of this series and explore baseline understandings of key components in the series. The introductory volume covers the contextual emphasis, the hermeneutical grounding and the theological framework for this series.

Therefore, the purpose of this brief introduction is neither an attempt to replicate nor replace the Introductory volume. To truly benefit from this series, one must start with that foundational volume.

Instead, this brief introduction is provided to explain four underlying goals for this series. Understanding these goals will help the reader gain the most insight when reading each separate volume. These goals are:

- Bridging knowledge with action
- Interacting with major faith systems
- Moving from defense to offense
- Creating a readable and helpful resource

## **Know, Be, Do: Bridging Knowledge with Action**

Each volume in the Africa Theology Series seeks to move the reader from theological foundations (Know) to cultural implications (Be) then finally to practical applications (Do). In the African context, the concrete is much more



impactful than the theoretical. In fact, oftentimes grievous errors in the pulpit or in pastoral practice come from those who can articulate the great doctrines of the faith both eloquently and sufficiently. These men often hold degrees from theological institutions where they were trained in sound doctrine and biblical orthodoxy. In other words, the errors that seem to plague the African church aren't necessarily from a lack of knowledge but rather from a lack of application of that knowledge into practice.

A short-sighted overcorrection would be to throw out knowledge-based teaching and instead simply focus on obedience-based action. However, this would be just as dangerous and ultimately counter-productive to healthy church. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are not against one another but rather two sides of the same coin. To have one without the other is not only incomplete but insufficient to build a biblically faithful and missions minded church.

The Africa Theology Series addresses these challenges by helping the pastor or church leader see the interconnectedness of knowledge and action. There is an African proverb that says, "Two hands wash one another." We need both knowledge and obedience. Therefore, each volume will, in its own unique way, lay a theological foundation for the specific doctrine being addressed as the authors seek to answer the question, "What should I know?"

The reader will then be challenged to see how this knowledge (what I know) necessarily informs identity (who I am). Every culture has elements that the Bible can affirm and appreciate and also elements the Bible condemns and corrects. Seeing your culture and your worldview through the Biblical lens is a painful but necessary step. In fact, this step of transformed hearts is the bridge needed on the path from transformed minds to transformed actions. The authors will challenge the reader to think deeply and introspectively about the cultural implications of doctrine as they seek to answer the question, "Who should I be?"

After knowledge and being comes doing. This is where information gets to work. Sound doctrine is not merely for the academic minded nor should it be reserved only for the seminary classroom. Instead, right doctrine must be applied and spill over into right practice. The authors of each volume will assist the reader in understanding the practical application of the doctrine in their lives as they answer the final question, "What should I do?"

The following statement provides a short summation of this goal:

**KNOWLEDGE** *informs* **BEING** *which drives* **DOING**

## **My Neighbor's Faith: Interacting with Major Faith Systems**

Another unique feature of the Africa Theology Series involves interaction with other major worldviews/religions. Africa is a very religious place where atheists are few and far between. Whereas books from the West might lean more into apologetical arguments aimed at skeptics, this series looks to interact with the other major faith systems on the continent.

While there are obviously outliers, the majority of Africans fall into one of several religious categories. These categories are much more diverse than a simplistic designation and are oftentimes complex combinations of two distinct categories into one. One such example would be the syncretization of two distinct categories (Islam and ATR) into one faith system (Folk Islam).

Practically this means that two Muslim men from the same tribe and living in the same city might have drastically different understandings of their faith. This also implies that some who would claim to be Evangelical Christians actually practice a much more animistic faith. These nuances and caveats are real and rampant but beyond the scope of this series, which will examine only the orthodox positions of each faith system.

However, the problem of neatly labeling categories becomes even more challenging due to the ambiguous nature of African Traditional Religion (ATR). There is no such thing as THE African Traditional Religion with an agreed upon set of beliefs. Instead, ATR is a large designation for those who would cling to an animistic faith ranging from voodoo to ancestral worship and everything in between.

It would be impossible to try and interact with every potential version of each faith system. However, it is incredibly important to understand the basic tenets (even if not held by everyone in the same way) of the major faith systems on the continent. In other words, it is helpful to know what an "average" Muslim believes about the doctrine of God and how that's different than the Evangelical Christian. Therefore, each volume in this series will provide side-by-side comparisons to highlight major differences between Evangelical Christians and these other religious systems.

## **Changing Tactics: Moving from Defense to Offense**

There is an anecdotal account of how those working to detect counterfeit currency spend their time only examining real currency. The story is used to illustrate the importance of focusing time and energy studying the truth instead of spending time dealing with falsehoods. While this is a point worth

noting and we would agree that knowing the truth is of utmost importance, we also believe it is a good and biblical practice to expose falsehoods.

The Africa Theology Series adopts an offensive standpoint instead of choosing to play defense alone. Far from being done in a mean-spirited fashion, each volume takes pastoral care to warn the flock of the dangers of false doctrines currently wreaking havoc on the African Church.

The prosperity gospel and many practices in Neo-pentecostalism pose an even greater threat to healthy church and missions advance than Islam or ATR. Throughout the New Testament there is a constant warning of dangers that arise from wolves pretending to be sheep. These dangers are especially devastating because they come from within the church. Paul tells the church in Corinth of a tactic of Satan wherein he disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14).

Any good shepherd knows he is responsible to care for his flock. This means two things practically: one, he must provide for them by leading them to grazing grounds and sources of water; secondly, and just as important, he must protect them by keeping them from dangers which seek to harm the flock.

In the same way pastors must provide and protect their flocks. They must lead their people to the green pastures of God's Word and to drink from the Living Water of knowing Christ. However, pastors must be able to defend their flock and protect them from enemies who would seek to destroy and harm.

Each volume will seek to expose the various errors and dangerous ways of prosperity teachers and Neo-pentecostal practitioners. The authors will show how these false teachers twist and misuse the Scriptures and, therefore, confuse various key doctrines. The hope, then, is that these volumes will help pastors and church leaders protect both themselves and their flocks by nurturing a spirit of discernment that can detect and expose unbiblical teaching and practices.

### **Short and Simple: Creating a Readable and Helpful Resource**

The American author Mark Twain once said, "I'm sorry this letter is so long. I did not have time to write a short one." In this quote Twain reveals a common misconception that the more words that are spoken (or typed) then the better the content. While it is true that sometimes exhaustive explanations are necessary, the reality is most subjects can be sufficiently and succinctly explained without endless words.

The volumes in the Africa Theology Series are intentionally short and written in a way to be accessible to the largest audience of readers. The shortness comes from a ruthless approach to writing that seeks to explain the most significant truths with the fewest amount of words in the simplest way possible.

The goal is to create a resource that is readable and helpful. The authors seek to use story, dialog, proverbs, concrete examples, and other illustrious words to help complicated doctrines become understandable and applicable. Each volume also includes quick access reference guides for comparative charts on the various beliefs of each faith system.

### **The Journey Ahead**

There is an African proverb that says, “A baby on its mother's back doesn't know the journey is long.” Everyone, to some level, has benefited from the hard work of others. Teachers, pastors, theologians, authors, professors, parents, and myriads of others have suffered greatly to carry us along. We are where we are today because of their sacrifice.

The volumes in the Africa Theology Series have come about because many men who have many responsibilities deemed it worthy to set aside time to create the resource you now hold in your hand. These resources are the result of countless hours of work so that the African church might grow in her faithfulness to the task. Our hope is that their sacrifice “carries” you along in your faith journey.

Mark Phillips and Kevin Rodgers  
Series editors



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# INTRODUCTION

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- Jones Ndzi -

A. W. Tozer once said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>1</sup> For everyone who takes the Bible seriously, Tozer’s assertion is incontrovertible. The Bible repeatedly shows that the life and future of every human being hangs on what he or she believes about God. Thus, nothing could be more important than what we believe about God. As Tozer further argued, “The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.”<sup>2</sup>

What about our view of the church? How important is it? First of all, the Bible assigns great weight and significance to the church and how we must understand it. Consider for a moment just how seriously the Bible talks about the church. Of all the things that Jesus could give himself to building—a powerful nation state, a famous aristocratic class of individuals, an admirable and highly coveted family, far reaching social and religious reforms—he said, “I will build my church” (Matt.16:18).<sup>3</sup> His apostles were captivated by the outstanding significance of the church. It was never lost on Paul that the church belongs to God and that he purchased it with the blood of His own Son (Acts 20:28). The uniqueness of Jesus defines the uniqueness of the church (1 Cor. 3:10-11). The apostles believed that it is through the church that “the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10). Glory redounds to God “*in the church* and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

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<sup>1</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Natrona Heights, PA: General Press, 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bible quotations in this volume are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise indicated.

Amen” (Eph. 3:21). So, what comes to mind when we think about the church is outstandingly important. John Calvin said:

let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Mt. 22:30). For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for, as Isaiah and Joel testify (Isa. 37:32; Joel 2:32). To their testimony Ezekiel subscribes, when he declares, “They shall not be in the assembly of my people, neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel” (Ezek. 3:9); as, on the other hand, those who turn to the cultivation of true piety are said to inscribe their names among the citizens of Jerusalem. For which reason it is said in the psalm, “Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that thou bearest unto thy people: O visit me with thy salvation; that I may see the good of thy chosen, that I may rejoice in the gladness of thy nation, that I may glory with thine inheritance” (Ps. 106:4, 5). By these words the paternal favour of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal.<sup>4</sup>

But what is the church? One helpful way to answer this question is to try and understand the way the word “church” is used in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> The Greek word that is translated “church” in our English Bibles is ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*). Ἐκκλησία occurs a remarkable 114 times in the New Testament. As has been observed by others, the occurrences of the term in the various books of the New Testament are instructive.<sup>6</sup> Matthew uses it three times

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997), iv, i, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Another (complementary) approach to answering this question is to carefully consider the various metaphors or images with which the church is described in the New Testament. For example, it is referred to as the body of Christ, the temple of God, the household of God, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Frank J. Matera, *God’s Saving Grace: A Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 129.

(16:18; 18:17). Luke employs it 23 times in Acts.<sup>7</sup> The term occurs 61 times in Paul.<sup>8</sup> It appears twice in Hebrews (2:12; 12:23), three times in 3 John (3 John 6, 9, 10), once in James (5:14), and twenty times in Revelation.<sup>9</sup> The use of ἐκκλησία in Acts indicates that the first believers used the term from early on after the birth of the church to designate the gathering of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 11:22; 12:1, 5) and other places (Acts 11:26; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3, 22; 20:17).<sup>10</sup> The vast majority—about seventy five percent—of Paul’s uses of ἐκκλησία refer to the local congregation. Paul uses ἐκκλησία in this way in every occurrence of the word in Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy and Philemon.<sup>11</sup> Ephesians and Colossians, on the other hand, employ the term to speak of what is often referred to as the universal church—all believers of all times and places.<sup>12</sup>

Biblically the church exists as what we often call the *invisible* or *universal* church. The universality of the invisible church is unequivocally communicated in the fact that “There is . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5-6). But the church is more than just an invisible and universal reality. In God’s wisdom this awesome and spiritual reality called the universal church has had concrete instantiations in various times and places since the book of Acts and will do so until Christ returns. The kingdom of God advances primarily by the Spirit of God working through such local manifestations of the universal church. In fact, such local churches are outposts and beachheads of the kingdom of God. So, from and through the work of the church the kingdom establishes itself in new and yet-to-be-conquered territory. As George Ladd argued, “The Kingdom creates the church, works through the church, and is proclaimed in the world by the church. There can be no Kingdom

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<sup>7</sup> See Acts 5:11; 7:38; 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3, 4, 22, 41; 16:5; 18:22; 19:32, 39, 40; 20:17, 28.

<sup>8</sup> See Rom. 16:1, 4, 5, 16, 23; 1 Cor. 1:2; 4:17; 6:4; 7:17; 10:32; 11:16, 18, 22; 12:28; 14:4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 28, 33, 34, 35; 15:9; 16:1, 19; 2 Cor. 1:1; 8:1, 18, 19, 23, 24; 11:28; 12:13; Gal. 1:2, 13, 22; Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32; Phil. 3:6; 4:15; Col. 1:18, 24; 4:15, 16; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:1, 4; 1 Tim. 3:5, 15; 5:16; Phlm. 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Rev. 1:4, 11, 20; 2:1, 7, 8, 11, 12, 17, 18, 23, 29; 3:1, 6, 7, 13, 14, 22; 22:16.

<sup>10</sup> Matera, *God’s Saving Grace: A Pauline Theology*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Some interpreters have argued that certain texts like 1 Cor. 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; Gal. 1:13; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Cor. 12:28 and Phil. 3:6 refer not to a local church but to the whole church. See for example Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 328.

<sup>12</sup> Note that Col. 4:15, 16 uses ἐκκλησία to speak of local congregations.



without a church—those who have acknowledged God’s rule—and there can be no church without God’s Kingdom.”<sup>13</sup>

It is little wonder then that Paul attaches great significance to a local church. He says a meeting of people brought together under the Lordship of Jesus is “the household of God, . . . the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). This means that the leadership—the pastors and deacons—is never equivalent to the church. Rather, a local church is all its members considered.

Another truth that leaps at us from the New Testament is that the way we conceive of what a local church is and how it is to be set up will inevitably help or hurt our efforts at proclaiming the kingdom. For any given local church to effectively function as “the household of God, . . . the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” we must learn how “one ought to behave in [it]” (1 Tim. 3:15). There cannot be any doubt that the inhabitants of Jerusalem had a tangible demonstration of the gospel before their eyes when they saw the way the church in Jerusalem was conducting herself. We are told that the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:42-47a). The overall effect of this otherworldly community was that many more sinners were being saved: “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47b).

But it is not only unbelievers who are blessed when they see the gospel authentically displayed in a church. Barnabas, a seasoned disciple, full of the Holy Spirit and faith visited “and saw the grace of God,” in the fledgling church in Antioch and “he was glad” (Acts 11:23). He proceeded to make a strategic investment in this church. He went down to Tarsus, sought and brought Paul with him to Antioch. “For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26). In fact, we know that it is from the context of this work in Antioch that the Holy Spirit orchestrated the first ever intentional and cross-cultural mis-

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<sup>13</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald A. Hagner, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 117.

sionary outreach to the Gentile world. Biblically ordered churches will fortify believers in the faith. These believers will in turn serve to further the spiritual health of these churches. In time, Lord willing, the churches will be better able to deploy laborers for the global ingathering of God's elect from the nations of the earth as happened in the case of Barnabas and Saul.

Evidently, our effectiveness in God's work will hardly ever surpass our view and conviction about the local church. Another way to put it is to say that the gospel is essentially obscured when the church does not exist in a place or is established and run in patently unbiblical ways. Mark Dever has written a book entitled *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*.<sup>14</sup> What a fitting title! The local church is never neutral. It is always saying or failing to say something about the gospel to the world. Otherwise, why would the Lord of the church refer to local churches as "lampstands" (Rev. 1:20). "The notion here is that the church is to be light, illumining the world with the good news about Jesus Christ."<sup>15</sup> This points to the fact that there is great spiritual peril on the horizon for any age and place where people's thoughts about the church are out of sync with or antithetical to what God has revealed in His word about the church.

The present authors are thoroughly united on the incalculable importance of the local church for the perseverance of believers and the finishing of the Great Commission. It is in this unity and conviction that the chapters in this volume are set forth. The reader will soon find out that although this volume is about the church, it is not a systematic theological treatment of the subject. It is written with a regional focus in mind: the church in Africa. The work is divided into three main parts. In part one we consider the notion of the church as it developed through the unfolding storyline of the Bible and we give attention to the biblical offices of a local church. In part two we discuss the history of the church in Africa in relation to the global church as well as some of the major challenges she currently faces. In part three we suggest responses to the challenges discussed in the previous part, discuss some practical questions, and set forth key biblical characteristics of a healthy local church. Our bold confidence is that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). We pray that he will use our imperfect work in the lives of some "to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,

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<sup>14</sup> <https://9marks.myshopify.com/products/the-church-the-gospel-made-visible>

<sup>15</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "Revelation," in *Hebrews–Revelation*, ESV Expository Commentary ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. XII, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 568.

but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24-25).

PART ONE:



THEOLOGICAL  
FOUNDATIONS



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## CHAPTER 1

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### **THE BIBLICAL STORY OF THE CHURCH**

- Coye Still -

Where does the story of the church begin in the Bible? In one sense, it begins in the New Testament when Jesus declares, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). The church then becomes plainly visible in the book of Acts. Certainly, the biblical story of the church is largely a New Testament story, and we shall focus on the New Testament part of it in this chapter. In another sense, the story begins in the Old Testament. This will be no surprise when we recall that the Old Testament scriptures testify of Christ and his saving work (John 5:39; Luke 24:25-27, 46-47) and that the church was purchased by his blood in that saving work (Acts 20:28).

#### **THE STORY OF THE CHURCH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

The story of the church begins in the Old Testament in the sense that in the Old Testament God revealed purposes and plans that he intended to fulfill in the church. We begin tracing these purposes and plans in the book of Genesis.

#### **God’s Promises to Abraham and Abraham’s Faith - Genesis 12, 15**

God called Abraham<sup>16</sup> when he was in the land of Haran, and said to him, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). The Lord then promised, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2-3). Trusting in God, Abraham promptly went just as the Lord had told him (Gen. 12:4).

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<sup>16</sup> At the time of his call, Abraham’s name was Abram. God would later change his name to Abraham (Gen. 17:15).

Later, the Lord appeared to Abraham in a vision and told him that he would have a son and that his offspring would be numerous, even as the stars of heaven are numerous. Though Abraham and his wife, Sarah,<sup>17</sup> were advanced in age and childless, “he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Abraham believed the word, the promises, of the Lord and the Lord considered him righteous based on his faith.

Many centuries later, after the cross and resurrection of Christ, the Apostle Paul applied God’s promises to Abraham to “the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2). He referred to the people of the churches as “the sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7). How could this be? Many of the Galatian Christians were not even of Jewish descent. In what way were they Abraham’s sons, his children, his heirs? In what ways is the church of our day Abraham’s heirs?

One way is that as Abraham believed and was counted as righteous, so have we believed and been counted as righteous. We have heard and believed the word of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ and God has counted it to us as righteousness (Gal. 3:5-9; Rom. 4; cf. Gen. 15:6). We who are the church have been justified by faith (Gal. 2:16; 3:11, 24).

Another way that we are Abraham’s heirs is that we are recipients of the promises that God made to him. God promised Abraham that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3) and “in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 22:18). Paul taught that in such promises the Scripture was foreseeing that the Gentiles would receive the blessing in Christ (Gal. 3:8, 16). Though the Galatian church members were predominantly Gentile, they were “sons of God” and “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29). The blessings of salvation are not in one’s ethnicity or nationality. They are in Christ. Abraham’s heirs are the redeemed from among the nations—the church.

God’s promises to Abraham and Abraham’s faith, therefore, point to the church. God intended to bestow righteousness by faith and to extend salvation’s blessings to the nations. The church is the fellowship of God’s people in whom he has done and is doing these things.

### **A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation - Exodus 19:4-6**

One of God’s promises to Abraham was to make him “a great nation” (Gen. 12:22). Centuries after Abraham’s death, the Lord said to his descendants at Mount Sinai, “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exo. 19:3-6). Israel was

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<sup>17</sup> At this point, Sarah’s name was Sarai. God later changed her name to Sarah (Gen. 17:15).

encamped at Sinai as free people because of what the Lord had done for them. He had brought them out of slavery in Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (Deut. 26:8). He had granted them shelter under the blood of the Passover lamb and brought them through the Sea on dry ground.

Though Israel had every reason to live in priestly faithfulness and holiness before the Lord, too often the nation fell far short of keeping the covenant. Even before the people left Sinai, they made and worshipped a golden calf saying, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Exo. 32:4). Such treachery would not, however, frustrate God’s intent to have a people as his treasured possession and holy nation.

God would fulfill this intent in the church. Peter wrote to churches, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9-10).<sup>18</sup> Do you hear the echo of Exodus 19:4-6 in Peter’s words?

To the people of Israel at Sinai, God had spoken conditionally: “*If you obey my voice and keep my covenant ... you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exo. 19:5-6), but Israel failed to meet the condition. Peter’s declaration about the church is not conditional. It is a statement of fact: “*you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation*” (1 Pet. 2:9). We have been sanctified by the Spirit (1 Pet. 1:2) and ransomed with “the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). We have been called out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). The Passover lamb and the exodus from Egypt pointed to a greater redemption. They pointed to Christ’s redemption of his church to be “a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”

We acknowledge, of course, that to call the church “a holy nation” is not to say that she is perfect in the present age. Sin continued to be a problem in the churches during biblical times and it is a problem in churches today. The story of the church is a story of imperfect and weak people living under the longsuffering grace of God. On the one hand, our holiness does not depend on our present perfection, but upon God’s great provision in Christ’s atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:1-2). On the other hand, we who are the church are not slaves of sin as we were when we were in the dominion of darkness. The Spirit is at work to sanctify us as God’s elect (1 Pet. 1:1-2) and perfection will surely come for all who belong to him (Phil 1:6; Rom. 8:29-20).

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<sup>18</sup> Peter’s instruction to elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2) suggests that he was writing to churches, since elders were responsible for local churches (Acts 14:23).



In other words, God has declared the church to be, he is making her, and he will make her fully a kingdom of faithful priests and a holy nation. He was pointing to this at Sinai.

### **A New Covenant People - Jeremiah 31:31-34**

At the initiation of the Sinai covenant, Moses read from the “Book of the Covenant” (Exo. 24:7) and then threw the “blood of the covenant” (Exo. 24:8) from sacrificial animals on the people of Israel. Hundreds of years later, God revealed through Jeremiah that he would make a new covenant in which he would write his law on the hearts of his people and graciously grant them forgiveness. In Jeremiah 31:31-34 we read,

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Several centuries after God announced the new covenant through Jeremiah, Jesus gathered with his apostles for the Passover meal in which he instituted the Lord’s Supper. Giving the cup to them, Jesus said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). The cup signified Jesus’ blood of the covenant that was “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). What Jeremiah prophesied was coming to pass! With his own blood on the cross Jesus established the new covenant and provided forgiveness for all who would believe in him.

Jews who believe in Christ are included in this new covenant. Gentile believers are also included in the covenant and in the “assembly of the first-born” (Heb. 12:23) for whom Jesus himself is the mediator of this new covenant (Heb. 12:24). The assembly of believers in him is the church and the

church's observance of the Lord's Supper is a remembrance of the new covenant and a proclamation of the Lord's death by which it was established (1 Cor. 11:17-26).

Into the hearts of his new covenant people, God puts his laws (Heb. 8:10; cf. Jer. 31:33). He guides his people to honor his laws in the ways that are proper in Christ. For example, we do not literally practice the laws about Levitical priests and sacrifices (Lev. 1 – 9). These are shadows that have now been fulfilled in Christ's once for all sacrifice of himself on the cross (Heb. 10:1, 10).<sup>19</sup> We have no need for further animal sacrifices and God does not intend for us to offer them.<sup>20</sup> The laws of sacrifice testify to us to focus our trust on Christ as the perfect sacrifice for our cleansing from sin. As another example, God inclines us to obey his timeless commands to love him with our whole beings, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to love one another in Christ as he has loved us (Matt. 22:37-40; John 13:34-35; 1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2).

Through Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant God was pointing to the church. He established the new covenant at the death of his son for sinners, and those whom he calls and gathers as the church are his new covenant people in Christ who live out his will in this world.

### **The Promise of the Spirit - Ezekiel 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29**

It becomes clear in the prophecies of Ezekiel that this new covenant (Ezek. 37:26-27) was to be associated with a new work of the Spirit in the hearts of God's people: "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezek. 36:26-27). The wonderful breadth of the promised gift of the Spirit comes into focus in Joel's prophecy: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit" (Joel 2:28-29). Long after Joel and Ezekiel prophesied,

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<sup>19</sup> The Old Testament laws regarding sacrifices were figures of what was to come, pointers to something greater. Jesus is a better priest than were Aaron and his descendants. Jesus' sacrifice is a better sacrifice than the those that multiplied under the old covenant, for "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10). The Old Covenant has become obsolete in some ways (Heb. 8:13), though it stands forever as eloquent testimony to its fulfillment in Christ.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, to continue making Old Covenant sacrifices would be a denial of full faith in Christ and his once and for all sacrifice.

John the Baptist proclaimed, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).

Fulfillment of these marvelous prophecies came after Jesus died and rose again. As his ascension approached, he instructed the apostles “not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, ‘you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’” (Acts 1:4-5). When Jesus had ascended and the day of Pentecost had come, “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). To the multitude that came together to see and hear this phenomenon, Peter explained that this was the promised outpouring of God’s Spirit upon his people (Acts 2:16)! He also announced that the gift of the Spirit is for “everyone whom the Lord calls to himself” (Acts 2:39). That very day the Lord called to himself three thousand (Acts 2:41) and they became the church—a fellowship of the Spirit. Paul later wrote to the church in Corinth that “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews and Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13).

Through the Old Testament promises of the Spirit, God was pointing to the church as his redeemed and Spirit indwelt people. Indeed, the church is a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Tim. 3:15).

## **Conclusion**

The Old Testament portion of the story of the church shows us that God had great purposes and plans that were to be fulfilled in the church. These plans included justifying his people by faith, extending the blessings of salvation to all nations in Christ, having a people as his holy nation, establishing a new and better covenant with them, and bestowing on them the gift of the Spirit. The church’s story begins with these great purposes of God.

## THE STORY OF THE CHURCH IN THE GOSPELS

We could take more time with the story of the church in the Old Testament, but we will now move on to the New, starting with a famous passage in the book of Matthew.

### **“I Will Build My Church” - Matthew 16:13-19**

The first explicit reference to the church in the Bible is from the lips of Jesus himself. In Matthew 16:13-19, Jesus said, “I will build my church”:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

In this rich passage, prominent themes in the story of the church come into view: the supremacy of Jesus; the importance of Peter (and, by implication and extension, other leaders); and the promise of ultimate victory.

#### *The Supremacy of Jesus Over the Church*

Peter confessed Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” in the district of Caesarea Philippi, a city north of the Sea of Galilee. This setting magnifies the significance of the confession. Caves near the city still bear ancient images of the Greek god Pan carved into their stone walls. These same carvings were there when Jesus and his disciples walked in the region. In the city itself during Jesus’ day, an impressive temple to Caesar stood as a center of emperor worship. Additionally, Baal worship had flourished in the area before anyone even knew of Pan or offered sacrifices to a Caesar. In this land of many gods,

a simple Galilean fisherman declared Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). The true and living God is unique, in an altogether different category from Baal, Pan, Caesar and the rest of the “gods” of the world. His Son is likewise unique. He is supreme in authority over heaven and earth (Matt. 28:17), and over the church.

Jesus is also supreme as the church’s builder. He said, “I will *build* my church” (Matt. 16:18, italics mine). As pastors and leaders, we join him in building up the church (1 Cor. 3:10), but always with the awareness that “unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Psa. 127:1).

Jesus is also supreme as the church’s owner. He did not say that he would build someone else’s church. He said, “I will build *my* church” (Matt. 16:18, italics mine). In what senses does Jesus own the church? He owns the church as her founder. Further, he owns the church as her purchaser. He purchased the church with his blood on the cross (Acts 20:28). It is significant that Jesus spoke of his approaching death and resurrection from the time of Peter’s confession and his own announcement of the church (Matt. 16:21-22). As the Christ, the Son of the living God, he would gather his church as people whom he had redeemed in his death.

A wise old pastor gave a good word of encouragement during a young man’s ordination council meeting. He said, “Always remember that the church belongs to Jesus. The church does not belong to the pastor. A pastor leads and cares for the church, but never as her owner. We are stewards. We will give account to the owner for those whom he has entrusted to us.”

### *The Importance of Peter (and other leaders)*

The meaning of “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” has been extensively and intensely discussed and debated through the centuries.<sup>21</sup> To whom or to what was Jesus referring with the words “on this rock”? Was

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<sup>21</sup> One of the reasons, perhaps the main reason, for the duration and intensity of the debate is that the Roman Catholic Church links its claims regarding Peter and the papacy to this text, maintaining that Jesus was declaring that Peter would be the foundation of the church. “Papacy” refers to the office of the pope and its authority for the church. The Roman Church claims that Peter served as bishop of the church in Rome, that he was the first pope, that his successors as bishop of the church in Rome have been popes through the centuries, and that the Roman bishop has supreme authority over the true church worldwide. The fact is that if Jesus was referring to Peter as “this rock,” the extensive Roman Catholic claims would not thereby be substantiated. On the other hand, the Church would certainly struggle to find a biblical toehold for the papacy if it was clear that Jesus was not referring to Peter as “this rock.”

he referring to Peter?<sup>22</sup> Was he referring to himself? Or was he referring to the confession of faith that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God? The grammar of Jesus' statement would permit any of the three interpretations—i.e., that “this rock” refers to Peter, to the confession about Jesus, or to Jesus himself. In fact, notable interpreters have held to each view. Though we will not presume to settle here an issue that has remained unresolved for centuries, we will acknowledge a few things that may be helpful for understanding the importance of Peter (and other leaders) for the church.

One of these is that Peter is important no matter to whom or to what Jesus was specifically referring with the words “this rock.” If Jesus himself is “this rock,” then Peter was the one who received the revelation of and declared Jesus' identity.<sup>23</sup> If “this rock” refers to the confession of faith in Jesus, Peter led the way in uttering the confession that all future members of the church would affirm. If “this rock” refers to Peter himself, then Jesus was highlighting Peter's foundational importance. So, there is no interpretation in which Peter is unimportant.

Another thing to acknowledge is that, all the possible interpretations focus on the great significance of Jesus for the church. This is obvious if one interprets “this rock” to refer directly to Jesus himself. It is barely less obvious, if “this rock” is the confession, for the confession is about Jesus' identity. Similarly, if “this rock” is Peter, it is Peter in his capacity of recognizing and confessing the identity of Jesus.

Finally, whether “this rock” refers to Peter or not, we must acknowledge, if we are to be biblical in our views, a foundational role in the church for Peter, as well as for the other first-century apostles. We must do so because the New Testament does so. The church is made up of “the members of God's household, built on *the foundation of the apostles* and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:19-20, italics mine). Therefore, all the apostles are included in the church's foundation and Peter was clearly a leader among them. His foundational role for the church cannot be questioned biblically. At the same time, the Bible is clear that Jesus himself is the church's unique, essential, and unrivaled foundation, “for no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). Peter knew this and cited Isaiah 28:6 in reference to Jesus: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a

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<sup>22</sup> Greek is the original language of the New Testament. Peter's name in Greek (*Petros*) means stone or rock and is closely related to the Greek word for rock (*petra*) that Jesus used in the phrase “on this rock.” This is helpful to know and suggests a relationship between Peter's name and “this rock” in Jesus' statement but does not conclusively determine the referent of “on this rock.”

<sup>23</sup> Though Peter was not the only one of the twelve with the insight (Matt. 14:33).

stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame” (1 Pet. 2:6).

Peter’s importance is further apparent in Jesus’ promise of spiritual authority (Matt. 16:19). Jesus said, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” As a recipient of great revelation about Jesus (Matt. 16:16-17), Peter had great responsibility to proclaim Christ and call men and women to enter his kingdom (Matt. 24:9; 28:18-20). Jesus intended for Peter to have the authority necessary to fulfill his responsibility. The authority of “the keys of the kingdom” is the authority to call people to enter the kingdom in keeping with the conditions that the King has established—repentance and faith in the crucified and risen Savior and Lord (Mark 1:15, Luke 24:45-47; Acts 2:36-39; 20:21).

Peter was faithful with the keys when he proclaimed Christ at Pentecost and guided those who repented into the fellowship of believers (Acts 2:36-41). Peter was also faithful with the keys when he said courageously to the Jewish leaders, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Peter was again faithful with the keys when he rebuked Simon the magician in Samaria: “You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God” (Acts 8:21). The magician’s silver and gold did not sparkle in Peter’s eyes. The apostle knew and made plain that the gifts of God are not for sale!

Jesus went on to say that “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19).<sup>24</sup> In relation to “the keys of the kingdom,” to “bind” may be to discern and communicate that someone is outside the kingdom and the fellowship of the church and to “loose” may be to assure believers of forgiveness of sin and affirm them as citizens of the kingdom and members of the church fellowship.<sup>25</sup> We are, of course, to interpret Peter’s authority in light of Jesus’ own full authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18), God working all things out according to the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:13), and the Lord himself adding to his church (Acts 2:47; 13:48). In other words, Jesus was not giving Peter authority over heaven. Rather, as Peter acted responsibly under

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<sup>24</sup> Some English versions translate the Greek future perfect tense verbs of Matthew 16:19 as “whatever you bind on earth *will have been bound* in heaven and whatever you loose on earth *will have been loosed* in heaven” (Christian Standard Bible).

<sup>25</sup> To “bind” and “loose” also may refer to matters of discipline within the church fellowship, as seems to be the case in Matthew 18:18-20.

Jesus' lordship and leadership, the purposes of God would be worked out in Peter's decisions and would stand confirmed in heaven as well as on earth.

The promise of authority would soon extend beyond Peter to others as well (Matt. 18:18-19; John 20:23). All the apostles would receive the revelation of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. All would receive the commission to proclaim him. All would welcome men and women into the kingdom based on the conditions that Jesus had set. Jesus gave them the same responsibilities that he gave to Peter and conferred the same authority for fulfilling these responsibilities.<sup>26</sup> Though pastors and church leaders today are not apostles in the same sense as Peter and others were in the first century, we do have responsibilities and authority that Jesus has given. In short, human leaders are important for the church over which Jesus is supreme.

### *The Church's Triumph Over Hell*

Third, we learn from Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18 that "the gates of hell"<sup>27</sup> will not prevail against the church. What does this mean? Though the members of the church will pass through "the gates of death" (Job 38:17; Psa. 9:13; 107:18) unless the Lord returns first, we will not enter through "the gates of hell." That is, we will not enter the torments of hell and final separation from God. Persecutors may condemn the church's members to death (Matt. 24:9; Acts 12:1-2), but they cannot cast them into hell (Luke 12:4-5). All who have died in Christ will be raised when he comes again, raised with resurrection bodies transformed into the likeness of his own glorious body (1 Thess. 4:13-18; Phil. 3:20-21). Forever we will be with him in glory. We can take heart! Hell will not prevail against the church! The Church will have the victory.

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<sup>26</sup> Regarding Roman Catholic teaching concerning Peter and the papacy, we should observe, first, that the New Testament does present Peter as important and in a foundational role for the church, though to whom or what "this rock" refers in Matthew 16:18 remains a debated point. Second, the New Testament also presents all the apostles as foundational (Eph. 2:20). Third, the New Testament does not present Peter as supreme in authority among the apostles or as the head and supreme authority of the church. Neither does the New Testament suggest that Peter was to have successors who would occupy such a position in the church. Jesus did promise Peter significant authority, but he did not promise him supreme authority, for he conferred similar authority on others (Matt. 18:18). It seems to be on the mark to affirm Peter's importance while taking care not to overstate it.

<sup>27</sup> Some English versions have "the gates of Hades" rather than "the gates of hell" in Matthew 16:18. The word in the original Greek is ᾗδης (*hades*). In the New Testament, the word is associated with judgment (Matt. 11:23; Luke 10:15), torment (Luke 16:23), and abandonment (Acts 2:27, 31).



## The Church's Response to Sin - Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus knew sin would be an ongoing issue in the community of his disciples and gave instructions in Matthew 18:15-20 regarding how to deal with it.<sup>28</sup> We get the impression from this passage that the church is to take sin very seriously. Members are not exempt from accountability to one another and to the church. In some cases, members may even need to be removed from among the church (Matt. 18:17; see also, 1 Cor 5:2, 13). Does such a decision by the church carry real spiritual weight? Indeed, it does! Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18).<sup>29</sup> If the church acts responsibly and binds a member from continuing as part of the fellowship, heaven's authority stands behind the action. Likewise, if the church determines that a member is loosed to return to or continue in the fellowship, this also carries heavenly weight.<sup>30</sup>

We also get the quite clear impression from Matthew 18:15-20 that the recovery of a brother or sister is the desired goal of church disciplinary action. If the first conversation is successful, "you have gained your brother" (Matt. 18:15). Only if he does not listen at each level (Matt. 18:16-17) does the process continue toward exclusion from the fellowship. Even when the brother is "to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matt. 16:17) restoration would remain the hope and desire. After all, Jesus loves Gentiles and tax collectors. Matthew was a tax collector when Jesus called him to be a disciple (Matt. 9:9-13) and Jesus commissioned his followers to "make disciples of all nations," which includes the Gentiles (Matt. 28:18)! Immediately following Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus' conversation with Peter and telling of the parable of the unforgiving ser-

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<sup>28</sup> Although Jesus taught that his disciples must be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48), he also taught them to pray, "Forgive us our debts" (Matt. 6:11). He gave the imperative of holiness and recognized the need for ongoing forgiveness. We are being transformed from one degree of glory into another (2 Cor. 3:18) and we shall be perfected (Philippians 1:6; 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2). The time will come when we shall sin no more. We have not yet, however, come to that time. For now, we "stumble in many ways" (James 3:2) and, in the church, are to address sin wisely and graciously as the Lord Jesus directs.

<sup>29</sup> Some Christians apply Matthew 18:18 to binding evil spirits and loosing people from bondage to these spirits. In Matthew 12:29, Jesus does use the image of binding a "strong man" in reference to casting out demons. Praying in Jesus' name for evil spirits to be bound and people to be loosed from the influence of demons may be perfectly right in cases. It is good, however, to keep in mind that Matthew 18:18 is in the context of church disciplinary action.

<sup>30</sup> Of course, we are not perfect in our discernment. The Lord sees hearts more clearly than we. Thankfully, the Lord Jesus does not leave the church alone to stumble about in the darkness regarding disciplinary decisions. He said that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them" (Matt. 18:20). We can trust him to reveal in his time what the church is to do and guide her in doing it, so that in the actions of the church the will of the exalted Lord in heaven is worked out.

vant, leaves us with no doubt that he intends us to be eager and generous in extending forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-35). Pastors and elders can lead in expressing a gracious attitude toward others. If we have been wronged or slighted, we can be slow to take offense and quick to forgive. “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8) and “good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense” (Prov.19:11).

### **The Great Commission and the Church - Matthew 28:16-20**

The resurrected Jesus commissioned his disciples to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19). “All that I have commanded you” includes what is declared and taught about the church in the passages that have been discussed above. Other commands and teachings of Jesus also apply to life together in the church. For example, Jesus commanded that “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:26-28). The church’s members are to give of themselves sacrificially to serve one another.

### **A Community of Love - John 10, 13, and 17**

At times in the gospels, without explicitly referring to the church, Jesus indicated his intent to have a continuing community of his disciples. For example, Jesus taught in John 10 that his followers were to be a “flock” under his direction as their “shepherd” (John 10:16). This suggests his people would live together in community. A local church is an expression of this community. In John 13:33-34, Jesus gave his disciples “a new commandment” for relating to one another after his departure: “that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” This confirms that being disciples of Jesus involves living in loving relationship with others who also belong to him. We do this in the church. Finally, in John 17:20-21, Jesus prayed for disciples who would later believe in him based on the word of the apostles “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Jesus intended for believers in him to live in unity. Practically speaking, this involves life together and relating to one another in community as the church.

## Conclusion

We have seen that Jesus taught both directly and indirectly of the church. He announced the church. He gave commands that are pertinent to life in the church. He also showed that a community of his disciples was to continue after his death, resurrection, and ascension and indicated what he intended for this community to be like.

## THE STORY OF THE CHURCH IN ACTS

Near the beginning of the book of Acts, the risen Jesus instructs the soon to be Spirit-empowered apostles to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The message about Christ then spreads according to this Acts 1:8 pattern. It goes forth in Jerusalem (Acts 1 – 7), in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8), and beyond toward the ends of the earth (Acts 9 – 28). As the message goes forth and the Spirit works, churches begin.

### The Church in Jerusalem - Acts 1-7

Jesus’ resurrection and the Spirit’s outpouring had dramatic effects on the apostles. Men who had been behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19) stepped out boldly to tell of “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11) and proclaim Christ publicly! We can only attribute the change to their belief that Christ had risen and ascended to rule as Lord and to the Holy Spirit’s power.

#### *The Spirit and the Word Bring Forth the Church*

The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost was in fulfillment of God’s promise (Acts 1:4-5; Joel 2:16-21; Ezek. 36:27; Luke 3:15-16). When the apostles preached the word of Christ in the Spirit’s power, those who responded also received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39). They joined in fellowship as believers in Jesus and were soon called the “church” (Acts 5:11).

Not human wisdom and effort, but the Spirit and the word had brought forth the church. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42), which was “the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Today, we have “the apostles teaching” in the New Testament. It is by and in response to the word that people first believe and that believers are built up. Paul would say to the Ephesian brothers, “I commend you to God and to the word of his grace,

which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). By devoting ourselves truly to the word, pastors and congregations in our day can grow strong as well. The Spirit’s mighty work was also central to life in the fellowship. This showed in both miracles (Acts 2:43) and generosity (Acts 2:45; 4:34-37). The church is the people of God who have received the Spirit and have hearts inclined to walk by his word and in his will (Ezek. 36:27).

### *The Church Addresses a Complaint*

As the number of disciples grew, a complaint arose regarding some of the widows being neglected in the distribution of food. The apostles wisely recognized that their priorities were and should remain the ministry of the word and prayer (Acts 6:2-4). They also recognized that the complaint was valid. In response, they proposed appointment of men “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” to take responsibility for the food distribution. The church agreed with the plan and seven men were set apart for the new ministry. The church was well cared for, “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly” (Acts 6:7).

Should we think of these seven men as the first deacons? Although the text does not explicitly call them deacons, it is difficult not to think of them as deacons or, at least, as forerunners of deacons. They were what deacons ought to be: servants of the church ensuring that needs are well met, and that the ministry of the word can remain strong and unhindered.

## **The Church Beyond Jerusalem - Acts 8–12**

Acts focuses our attention on two of these men, Philip and Stephen, as powerful witnesses for Christ. Stephen handled the word of God with wisdom and boldness (Acts 6:54 – 7:53) and courageously laid down his life as a witness (Acts 7:54-60). On the day of Stephen’s death “a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem” began with Saul as one of its leaders (Acts 8:1-3). The persecution scattered the believers, including Philip, throughout the regions around Jerusalem and, in so doing, facilitated progress in obedience to Jesus’ command to be witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

### *Many Witnesses Proclaim Christ*

“Those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:1-4). It’s important to note that the ones who “went about preaching the word” in this

case were not the apostles. The apostles had remained in Jerusalem and, we may reasonably suppose, courageously continued to proclaim Christ there. But the scattered preachers were people such as Philip (Acts 8:5, 12-14; 21:8) and the unnamed “men of Cyprus and Cyrene”<sup>31</sup> (Acts 11:20) and others who were now proclaiming Christ outside of Judea. People other than the apostles had, of course, long been spreading the news about Jesus and the power of his name.<sup>32</sup>

In our day, many Christians who do not think of themselves as primary leaders ignore their important role in proclaiming Christ. “That’s the work of the pastors,” some may say. The fact is that believers from all walks of life can proclaim Christ and when the whole church joins in telling the good news, it spreads unhindered to more people, so that more may be saved.

### *The Message and the Church Cross Boundaries*

In the earlier chapters of Acts, as far as we are told, the church was only in Jerusalem. But in Acts 9:31, we hear of “the church throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria.” In Acts 11:26, “the church” is in Antioch (Acts 11:26) of Syria.<sup>33</sup> The church was spreading into other regions as the message about Christ advanced in keeping with Jesus’ command (Acts 1:8).

Boundaries were being crossed, not just geographically, but also ethnically and culturally. Samaritans (Acts 8:4-25) were different from the Jews ethnically, culturally, and religiously. First-century Jews generally had no dealings with them (John 4:9).<sup>34</sup> Jews also typically maintained strict boundaries in interacting with Gentiles. Jesus himself had led the way in crossing such boundaries. He conversed with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well (John 4:7-26) and then stayed among the people of her town for two days. In the Great Commission, Jesus effectively commanded his disciples to cross boundaries as witnesses to the Gentiles to make disciples among all nations (Acts 1:8; Matt. 28:19).

Confirmation of God’s intent to include Gentile believers fully in his saving work came unmistakably as the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius’ Gentile household while Peter was preaching Christ to them (Acts 10:34-48; see also 8:14-17). In the face of such evidence, Jewish objections (Acts 11:3) turned to acknowledgements that “to the Gentiles also God

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<sup>31</sup> Cyrene was a city of Northern Africa, in what is now Libya.

<sup>32</sup> See Mark 5:19 and Matthew 28:5-10. News about Jesus and deeds in his name tended to spread rapidly and broadly (Mark 1:45; Acts 5:16), suggesting that it did so by word of mouth through many people.

<sup>33</sup> Two cities named Antioch are important in Acts—Antioch in Syria and Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:14). Both cities were in what is now Turkey.

<sup>34</sup> For background on the Samaritans, see 2 Kings 17:24-41.

has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). God had made his will plain for all who had eyes to see.

### *An Ethiopian Man Receives Baptism*

Even before Cornelius turned to Christ, a man from the heart of Africa believed and was baptized. As the Lord directed, Philip went to the road that went from Jerusalem to Gaza and met an Ethiopian man who was returning after worshipping in Jerusalem (Acts 8:26-28). He was a high official in the Ethiopian queen’s government. He was also a eunuch. Though a worshipper of God, as a eunuch, he was excluded from the assembly of God’s people (Deuteronomy 23:1). Exclusion would not, however, be the last word for him. As Isaiah had prophesied, the foreigner and the eunuch would have a place in the Lord’s covenant and house (Isaiah 56:3-5).

The man was reading from Isaiah 53 when Philip joined him (Acts 8:28-33). Philip began from this passage and told him the good news about Jesus. The eunuch asked what would hinder him from being baptized. That is, what would prevent him from receiving the sign that he belonged to Christ and was included in the people of God? Nothing! Being a Gentile did not hinder him. Being a eunuch did not! The promises of salvation were for him (see Acts 2:38-39)!

### *Jesus Calls Saul*

We return now to the story of Saul.<sup>35</sup> When he was “still breathing threats and murder” against the disciples (Acts 9:1), Jesus appeared to him and called him (Acts 9:1-19), and the persecutor became the preacher of Christ and the planter of churches. The account of Saul’s call highlights three points of importance for our study of the church. The first is that Jesus identifies with his church. Jesus said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” and, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:4-5). “Persecution against the church” (Acts 8:1), the “disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1), is persecution of Jesus. A second point is that the message of Christ, the church’s message, is for the whole world. Saul’s mission was to carry the name of Jesus before “the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). In his ministry, God was fulfilling his promise to Abraham that in him all nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3; 22:18; Gal. 3:8). The third point is that there is suffering to endure in proclaiming Christ. Saul was to suffer for Jesus’ name (Acts 9:16; see also, Acts 26:16-18). The suffering began shortly after the preaching began (Acts 9:23-25, 29). Saul’s suffering for Christ was also suffering for the church, the body of Christ (Col. 1:24) with which

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<sup>35</sup> Saul is a Hebrew name. Paul is a Greek name by which he is called from Acts 13:9 forward.

Jesus identifies (Acts 9:4-5). As a persecutor, Saul inflicted suffering on the church. As an apostle, he suffered for the church.

### **A Missionary Journey and New Churches - Acts 13-14**

Saul, “who was also called Paul” (Acts 13:9), and Barnabas were among the prophets and teachers in the church in Syrian Antioch. Africa appears to have been represented in this group (Acts 13:1). Lucius was from Cyrene, a city in what is now Libya. Simeon may also have been from Africa.<sup>36</sup> Lucius and Simeon participated in a highly significant event that took place in Antioch. As the Spirit led, the church sent out Paul and Barnabas to a work of proclaiming Christ that would also involve starting new churches.

Paul and Barnabas first preached Jesus on the island of Cyprus. From there they moved to Antioch of Pisidia<sup>37</sup> and then to other cities. In city after city, people turned to Christ in faith and new churches began. On the return journey to Syrian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas revisited the cities in which they had preached and “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). The Holy Spirit had given Paul and Barnabas great success in the work.

In addition to success, persecution came to the missionary preachers (Acts 13:50; 14:5). It was most intense in Lystra where a crowd stoned Paul and left him for dead (Acts 14:19). He survived, however, and when he and Barnabas later revisited the city, they encouraged the disciples to continue in faith “saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Serving Christ involves persevering through suffering, but no one who endures to the end for Christ will regret it, for suffering will finally give way to incomparable glory (Rom. 8:18).

### **A Consequential Decision - Acts 15**

As Gentiles responded to the gospel, an important question for the church arose: what is the Gentile believers’ relationship to the Jewish law? Some Jewish Christians insisted that the Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5). After the matter surfaced in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas and others went to Jerusalem to discuss it among the apos-

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<sup>36</sup> “A Narrative Timeline of God’s Work in Africa,” in the *Africa Study Bible*, 1944, suggests that Simeon “was likely from one of the regions known today as Tunisia or Algeria.” The *Lew Living Translation* renders the Greek *Niger* as “the black man.”

<sup>37</sup> See note 18 above.

tles and elders there. In Jerusalem, Peter, and then Paul and Barnabas, reported how God had worked among the Gentiles and borne witness to his acceptance of them by faith (Acts 15:7-12). Peter stressed that neither Jew nor Gentile will be saved through circumcision and law keeping, but only “through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11).

James proposed a judgment that “seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church” (Acts 15:19-22). The Gentile believers in Jesus did not need to be circumcised and come under the full law of Moses to be saved and were not under obligation to do so. They were instructed simply to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:28-29). In this way, the Gentiles would show true repentance by avoiding sexual immorality. They would also show consideration for their Jewish brothers by respecting some basic Jewish dietary scruples.<sup>38</sup>

Although this did not put all tension to rest permanently, it was a great affirmation of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. The decision was an acknowledgment that God had already confirmed his acceptance of Gentile believers by pouring out his Spirit on them apart from circumcision and keeping the Mosaic law. It also showed sensitivity to Jewish believers and to other Jews who might consider turning to Christ (see Rom. 14:1-4; 1 Cor. 9:19-23).

The Acts 15 meeting was of great consequence for the church and for missions. It confirmed that Gentiles did not need to thoroughly adopt Jewish lifestyles to be Christians. Today, it is not necessary for a new believer in an unreached people group to adopt another culture to be a Christian. African believers do not need to conform to a Western culture to be Christians. Also, African missionaries go to the nations to proclaim Christ, not to export African culture. A culture may be transformed in certain aspects by Christ, but submission to him does not mean converting to someone else’s culture.

### **Further Advance for the Gospel and the Church - Acts 16–20**

During a second missionary journey, this time with Silas as a partner (Acts 15:39 – 18:22), Paul proclaimed Christ in the cities of Philippi (Acts 16:11-40), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9), and Corinth (Acts 18:1-17). He later wrote letters to the churches in these locations.

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<sup>38</sup> Though Jesus had declared all foods clean (Mark 7:18-19), avoidance of certain foods would be respectful and remove barriers to fellowship in many situations.



After returning to Antioch and spending some time there, Paul began a third preaching and church planting journey (Acts 18:23) on which he went to Ephesus (Acts 19). In this great city, people believed in Christ and received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-10). Paul preached the word, “reasoning daily” (Acts 19:8-10). God bore witness to the message with extraordinary miracles (Acts 19:11-12) and a church began. As it had been on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the Lord brought forth his church by the Spirit and the word.

### **God’s Faithfulness and His Servants’ Suffering - Acts 21–28**

The final section of Acts tells of Paul experiencing many tribulations, including an attempt on his life (Acts 21:27-31), an organized plot against him (Acts 23:12-35), a long imprisonment (Acts 21:33 – 28:31), and a fierce storm at sea which ended with a shipwreck (Acts 27:13 – 28:44). As in the earlier chapters of Acts, the theme that the servants of the Lord and his church will face suffering is highlighted.

Acts 21 – 28 highlights another theme as well: God’s faithfulness and good purposes in hardships. When a crowd sought to kill Paul, a Roman tribune stepped in to stop the attack (Acts 21:32) and then allowed Paul to bear witness of Christ to the crowd (Acts 22:1-21). The arresting officer was a rescuer who gave the platform for witness. When the tribune heard of a plot on Paul’s life, he sent Paul to Caesarea on horseback with an armed escort fit for a king’s ambassador (Acts 23:12-35). Imprisoned in Caesarea, Paul proclaimed Christ to governors and a king (23:33 – 26:32) in fulfillment of Jesus’ words to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:15). On the journey to Rome a great storm at sea led to a shipwreck, but no lives were lost, for God had granted to Paul the safety of all who were on the ship with him (Acts 27:13-44).<sup>39</sup> He intended for Paul to testify of Christ in Rome (Acts 23:11; 27:24) and Paul did so (Acts 28:17-31). God works out his purposes for his servants and for his church, even in suffering.

### **Conclusion**

Acts ends with Paul “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). Paul was bound by a chain and under house arrest. Were these hindrances? In one

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<sup>39</sup> God does not always preserve the earthly lives of his servants, as Stephen (Acts 7:60) and James’ (Acts 12:1-2) deaths confirm, but he does work out his purposes for his servants through their suffering.

sense, of course they were. But were they hindrances to God in accomplishing his purposes? Not at all. In Jerusalem while Paul was in Roman custody, the Lord had stood by him in the night and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome” (Acts 23:11). The chain and the house arrest in Rome were tools in the Lord’s hand to accomplish his purposes for Paul. So, without hindrance the imprisoned apostle preached Christ, as without hindrance the gospel had crossed barriers between Jew and Samaritan, and Jew and Gentile. Without hindrance the Ethiopian eunuch and the believers of Cornelius’ household had received baptism. Without hindrance the Lord grows and multiplies his church by his Spirit and by the word of truth, the gospel of the Jesus Christ.

## THE STORY OF THE CHURCH IN THE EPISTLES

The New Testament epistles (or letters) contribute immeasurably to the story of the church. We have benefited already in this chapter from the epistles’ interpretations of Old Testament passages as pointing to the church and references to the epistles will permeate this entire volume on the church. In the present brief section, we will focus on four of their many contributions to the church’s story.

First, the epistles emphasize that the church’s story is the gospel story. The church is based on and exists by the good news of Jesus Christ. In some cases, the epistles testify to this structurally. For example, in Romans and Ephesians the apostle Paul sets forth the gospel message (Rom. 1 – 11; Eph. 1 – 3) and then applies it to life together in the church (Rom. 12 – 14; Eph. 4 – 6). In other cases, the centrality of the gospel message for the churches shows in the ways situations are addressed. For example, enduring injustice with trust in God is based on the story of Jesus who entrusted himself to him who judges justly and “bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24). Also, generous giving to fellow believers who are in need is based on the story of Jesus: “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

Second, the epistles contribute answers to the question, “What is the church?” The word “church” is the English translation of *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), a word that commonly referred in first-century Greek to an assembly, such as an assembly of citizens (Acts 19:39, 41). The epistles show that the church is the assembly of “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to

be saints” (1 Cor. 1:2; see also, Rom. 1:7; Phil. 1:1).<sup>40</sup> The epistles also help us understand the church’s nature in their use of metaphors.<sup>41</sup> The church is the body of Christ in which members are interconnected (Rom. 12:4-5) and have complementary spiritual gifts for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7-10). The church is the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:12) whose relationship with him is the pattern upon which God’s design for human marriage is based (Eph. 5:31-32; Gen. 2:24). The church is the household of God (Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15) in which members are children of God and brothers and sisters to one another. The church is also the temple that is a dwelling place for the Spirit of God (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 3:16-17) in which members “like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5).<sup>42</sup>

Third, the epistles contribute the insight that the church has always had problems to address internally and challenges to face externally. The early church experienced divisions within (1 Cor. 1:10-12; 2:1-23); immoral behavior (1 Cor. 5), disagreement about dietary practices and observance of special days (Rom. 14:1-12), persecution from outsiders (2 Tim. 3:12), and so on. The epistles help us understand that problems have always been a part of the story of the church. It is nothing new for our churches to face them.

Fourth, the epistles encourage profound optimism based on the sure hope that the church’s future will be glorious. A glorious salvation will finally be revealed to us (1 Pet. 1:3-9) and our savior will come again and the dead in Christ will be raised (1 Cor. 15:20-28; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). This is “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Tit. 2:13). At his coming we will be transformed into his likeness (1 John 3:2; Phil. 3:20-21) and stand before him as a radiant and blameless church (Eph. 5:27; Jude 24-25).

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<sup>40</sup> The New Testament speaks both of local churches and of the church as all the redeemed from among the nations (see, for example, 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 3:21; Heb. 12:23).

<sup>41</sup> See [www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/new-testament-metaphors-for-the-church/](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/new-testament-metaphors-for-the-church/)  
<sup>42</sup> Knowing that the church is an assembly of believers in Christ helps us to clarify what it is not. It is not, for example, essentially a literal building of brick or stone. A long tradition in the English language endorses referring to a church building as “the church,” but we need to be clear that “the church,” biblically speaking, is the ransomed people of God. Further, a church is not a business, especially not a business that is for the profit or enrichment of her leaders (1 Pet. 5:1-4; 1 Tim. 6:6-10). A church is also not a stage for spiritual performances or masquerades (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

## THE STORY OF THE CHURCH IN REVELATION

This brings us to the final book of the Bible. The biblical story of the church continues through Revelation and here comes to a wonderful resolution in Christ's victory which the church shares with him.

The challenges that the seven churches of Revelation 2 – 3 faced were substantial. They are representative of the challenges that churches continue to face in our day: false teaching (Rev. 2:6, 14-15, 20-23); suffering, tribulation, and persecution (Rev. 2:10, 13); temptation to immorality (Rev. 2:20-21; 3:4); spiritual lethargy and lukewarmness (Rev. 3:2-3; 3:15-16); and mistaking worldly prosperity for spiritual prosperity (Rev. 3:17-18). In such struggles, the seven churches were not alone. Neither are we. Christ stands ready to supply what we need to endure and thrive as his witnesses (Rev. 3:18-20), including the sure hope that the age in which we now live is not forever. A day is coming when marvelous words will resound from heaven: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

Christ will come in power and great glory. The dead in Christ will be raised. Indeed, all will finally be raised, but the difference will be striking between the ransomed church and the unredeemed. The people of God, the church, will be raised to see the face of their God and dwell with him forever. The unredeemed will be raised unto final judgment and eternal suffering.

The holy city, the new Jerusalem, will be "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). The church—redeemed by the Lamb—will enter and dwell in this city. Then we shall see in fullness the reward of Christ's suffering. He gave himself up for the church to sanctify her "so that he might present her to himself in splendor" (Eph. 5:27) and the resplendent church will reign with the Lord God as his servants forever and ever (Rev. 22:5)!

### Conclusion

When we look out upon our gathered churches, do we value rightly what we see? Whether or not the assembly looks impressive by worldly measures, it is a local congregation of the ransomed church of God. These blood-bought saints will be gloriously transformed at the coming of the Lord and forever be with him. "When he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). What a glorious story it is and how glorious it is to be in Christ and his church!



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## CHAPTER 2

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### **THE BIBLICAL OFFICES OF THE CHURCH**

- Jones Ndzi -

A common maxim in biology is that structure and function are closely related. What this means is that the various organs and systems of living things must each have a certain structure to fulfill the vital functions that they individually carry out. When an organ or system is malformed it will malfunction, and very often diseased conditions ensue with fatalities in some cases. This biological phenomenon is very comparable to what happens in the church. A church can only function as well as it is set up; including but not limited to the organization and function of its leadership. The biblical testimony is that when church leadership is rightly understood and faithfully practiced the result is increased effectiveness in a local church's ability to proclaim the message of the kingdom of God (cf. Acts 6:7). In this chapter we look at local church leadership which we are here referring to as "the biblical offices of the church" for reasons explained below.

#### **KEY LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS IN THE CHURCH**

The word "office(s)" is often used to designate key leadership functions in the church, and I am applying the term here to three main leadership functions: apostle, pastor, and deacon. There are a number of reasons for focusing on these three. First, the NT teaches that people were specifically appointed to and publicly recognized as holding these offices (Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16; Gal. 2:9; 1 Tim. 1:12; Acts 6:1-6; 14:23). Contrariwise, we are never told that someone was appointed to the office of prophet, evangelist, or others, even though some individuals were known to be evangelists (Acts 21:8; 2 Tim. 4:5) or prophets (Acts 11:27-28; 15:32). Second, the NT indicates that the offices of pastor and deacon will exist and serve every local church up until the second coming of the Lord (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1; Acts 20; 1 Pet. 5). Third,

clearly spelt out qualifications are only given for apostles, pastors, and deacons (Acts 1:1-5, 22-24; 1 Cor. 9:1; 2 Cor. 12:12; 1 Tim. 3:1-12; Tit. 1:5-9).<sup>1</sup>

## Apostles

The word apostle is mostly used in the NT to designate those who were directly commissioned by the Lord Jesus to execute the crucial groundwork of laying the foundation of the church (1 Cor. 9:1-2; 2 Cor. 12:12). In fact, being thus commissioned was one of two determinative qualifications for an individual's claim to the office (Matt. 10:1-7; Acts 26:14-18). The other qualification was that they had to have seen the risen Lord Jesus (Acts 1:2-5, 21-22; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:3-8; 2 Cor. 12:12). These apostles have handed down to the church of all ages "the faith [i.e., the body of teaching] that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3; cf. 1 Cor. 15:3). The church's role then is "to contend for [that] faith" (Jude 3). But the church is to do so under the shepherding function of pastors who "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Tit. 1:9).

## Pastors

The term "pastor" is very sparsely used in its noun form in the NT. A number of English translations only use the term pastor in one place (Eph. 4:11).<sup>2</sup> Peter pulls three words together which are used to designate this office or describe its functions. He says, "So I exhort the *elders* among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: *shepherd* the flock of God that is among you, *exercising oversight*, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly" (1 Pet. 5:1-2). Peter addresses himself to this group among the believers whom he calls elders. He even says he is himself a fellow elder—which is not surprising because John refers to himself as such (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Peter commands these elders to shepherd or pastor the flock of God that is among them. The Greek word translated here as "shepherd" is the verbal form of the noun translated as 'pastor' in Ephesians

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a list of qualifications for widows (cf. 1 Tim. 5:9-16). Obviously, this does not mean that we have an "office of widows" in the church. Rather the widows are delineated as a group to be cared for by the church (1 Tim 5:16). They are not appointed to a specific ministry role in the church.

<sup>2</sup> Among these are the NIV, NASB, NLT, and CSB.

4:11. In fact, there is a harmonious combination of sounds in Peter's exhortation in the Greek text (1 Pet. 5:2): *poimainate*. . . *poimnion* (shepherd. . . the flock). This command was burned onto Peter's heart by the well-known words of the Lord Jesus to him in John 21:16: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, "Tend (*poimaine*) my sheep" (John 21:16). Summarily, what is the responsibility of elders? They shepherd or pastor the flock.

Peter also helpfully shows us how these elders are to carry out the responsibility of pastoring or shepherding. They are to do so by "exercising oversight" or by "looking over." The word here translated "exercising oversight" is a participle of the verb 'to oversee.' In Titus 1, Paul left Titus in Crete to "appoint elders in every town" (Tit. 1:5). Anyone thus appointed is "an overseer, . . . God's steward" (Tit. 1:7). In Acts 20, Luke tells us that from Miletus, Paul sent for the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). These elders, Paul says, were made overseers to care for (or pastor [*poimainein*])—the same word used in 1 Pet. 5:2) the flock of God (Acts 20:28). So, as many have rightly noted, the words elder, pastor, and overseer are used interchangeably in a number of places in NT.

A couple of important observations are in order at this point. The first is that except for the times when "elder" or "overseer" is used generically the word is almost always in the plural in the NT. We are shown this in the NT where churches envision and affirm multiple men serving as elders in every local church. The picture we are given is of a "council of elders" leading together (1 Tim. 4:14). A second observation has to do with the question of a senior pastor. The NT does not specifically address that question, but we do have a few hints that point to what some Bible teachers have called "a leader among equals." These include the fact that the Lord Jesus specifically addressed Peter when he talked about building his church (Matt. 16:18), though we know that the apostolic foundation of the church is not Peter alone (Eph. 2:20). Also, Peter leads the way in the replacement of Judas even as he fully recognized that he was leading a company of brothers (Acts 1:15-26). Moreover, Paul and Barnabas were both commissioned to take the gospel to the Gentile world of their day (Acts 13:1-3), but we are told that, of the two, Paul "was the chief speaker" (Acts 14:12). Likewise, there is biblical precedent for brothers who excel in the grace of teaching and leadership exercising leadership influence in the midst of a council of elders (Acts 15:1-21).

So, if a person is gifted and feels called to serve as a lead pastor, he is to take the responsibility (when God brings it) with great sobriety and a deep sense of servant heartedness. He is to remember that anyone called to such a function is required to follow in the footsteps of his Lord and Master who



came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Also, fellow elders who are called to serve alongside a senior or lead pastor must diligently guard themselves against the temptation to competition and a desire for prominence as the world knows it (Mark 10:35-37).

## Deacons

The word for deacon, *diakonos* (or related forms), is used in a few different ways throughout the NT. Jesus (Rom. 15:8), angels (Heb. 1:14), certain women (Rom. 16:1), and all disciples are called deacons in various NT contexts. There is, however, a specific use of the word where the referent is to individuals who have been publicly appointed and thus recognized to attend to the physical needs of the church. The Bible speaks of deacons in this way in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, and Philippians 1:1.

There is not much data available in the NT on the specifics of the functions of deacons. At first sight this seems surprising and may be even a little disappointing. But we must not forget that the authors of the NT were shaped deeply by the conviction that the gospel is not a tribal or regional affair. Thus, this relative silence on the functions of deacons is very consistent with the gospel. The silence anticipates the fact that the gospel was intended to go everywhere, and churches would be planted everywhere. What these churches need is not a detailed list of the specifics of what deacons should be doing, but instructions that tell the church to have such an office and who should fill it. With such fundamental direction given, the specifics of what deacons do at any given church will grow out of the specific physical needs that arise from the ministerial context of that church. In the OT everything was culturally homogenous and the specifics of worship including the physical needs that go with it and the needs of God’s people in general were predictable. As such, a whole book like Leviticus could be written with minute details on how temple workers were to serve. Not so in these times of the new covenant. It is the Lord’s indomitable purpose that the gospel reaches every people group on the planet. This means that the physical needs and, therefore, the role of deacons will vary from place. For example, a church in the center of Accra, Ghana in the twenty first century will have some diaconal needs that are never felt in another church in the same country. So, the responsibilities of a diaconate will very much reflect the location of the local church in question. Furthermore, even in the same geographical location, the responsibilities of deacons will change over time because people’s needs change over time. So, the Bible’s very general instructions on the functions of deacons is both a blessing and one more proof of the wisdom and perfect consistency of the Author of the

Bible. Every church's main responsibility when it comes to the function of deacons is to select spirit-filled individuals to fill the office. These individuals will then take up the responsibility of the diaconate and seek the Lord for wisdom and develop locally effective strategies to address the needs facing their particular congregation.

## QUALIFICATIONS OF ELDERS AND DEACONS

As mentioned above, one of the reasons it is right to regard the functions of elders (or pastors) and deacons as standing functions in the church is because the Bible lists specific qualifications that individuals who fill these offices must meet. In this section we will give attention to these qualifications. First, we will look at the qualifications that apply to both offices and then we will look at a qualification that is specific to one of these two offices.

### Qualifications Common to Elders and Deacons

It is clear from 1 Timothy 3 that God requires that the high office of elder be matched by the dignity of the character of the one who fills that office. That is why 1 Timothy 3:1-2 is structured the way we have it. "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach." Paul's point in these verses is that any prospective overseer must be irreproachable because the office they aspire to is a noble one. In other words, the general pattern and testimony of an elder's life should match up with the gospel. There must not be proven patterns of sinful living that mark an elder's or elder candidate's life. This is required for deacons as well. Paul states that "deacons likewise must be dignified" (1 Tim. 3:8). Paul makes the connection between the qualifications of deacons and elders very clear. Just as pastors must be "above reproach," so also deacons "must be dignified." Paul even requires that deacons "be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless" (1 Tim. 3:10). It is remarkable to observe that the Greek word here translated "blameless" (ESV) is the same one rendered "above reproach" in Titus 1:6 where Paul is describing the character qualifications of pastors. The word is ἀνέγκλητος.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, the apostles asked that those to be

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<sup>3</sup> Ἀνέγκλητος indeed describes the future of every believer (1 Cor. 1:8; Col. 1:22). So, it is fitting that those who lead God's church should be people who by God's grace have made observable and encouraging strides in that direction.

selected to serve tables should be “men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3). When a church is led by pastors who are above reproach and served by deacons who are dignified, the word of the Lord is adorned and the witness of the church is powerful and effective. When the reverse is true, much discredit is brought to the testimony of the church and the witness of the gospel.

A few cautions are worthy of note here. Church offices and responsibilities can easily be perverted and turned into sickening coverups for sin and the works of the flesh. But those who name the name of the Lord must remember that to be “above reproach” and dignified summarily means that pastors and deacons must live in a way that no one could bring provable charges of gospel-tarnishing behavior in their lives. A man of God who is above reproach is never one who uses his freedom in Christ as an opportunity for the flesh and a cover-up for evil (Gal. 5:13; 1 Pet. 2:16). Rather he is committed to service for the sake of the good of God’s flock according to the example of his Lord and master (Rom. 15:3).

Another caution to remember is that we can never be more radical in God’s work than the Bible. Whenever we over-interpret God’s instructions for anything, we cause problems for ourselves. Yes, sometimes such moves may feel spiritual and zealous, but they ultimately question God’s wisdom given us in the Bible. In that vein, we may ask, “What is it that the Bible does not require of elders and deacons?” The answer will be that Paul is not calling elders and deacons to sinless perfection. To be “above reproach” and to be “dignified” do not mean the same as to be sinlessly perfect. Such a reading is both wrong and dangerous because it contradicts clear biblical teaching. John warns that “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). James declares that “we all stumble in many ways” (Jas. 3:1). We read of how Peter sinned in shocking ways (Luke 22:54-62; Gal. 2:11-14), but by God’s grace could still refer to himself as “an apostle” (1 Pet. 1:1), “a servant and apostle” (2 Pet. 1:1), and “a fellow elder” (1 Pet. 5:1). This does not allow any room for excuses to sin. This is simply to let the Bible set the agenda for the life and work of God’s people. It is always problematic to attempt to be stricter than the Bible. Whenever we try, we put ourselves at risk of self-deception and hypocrisy. Man-made standards may well have “an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:23). If we get caught up in the temptation to be “super-spiritual” and try to demand more than the Bible demands, we will certainly find men who will pose as qualified only to expose themselves and the church to ridicule. But if we learn from Paul “not to go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6) in this matter,

we will protect ourselves from the temptation for pastors and deacons to try to be in public what they are not at home.

To sum up, “above reproach” and “dignified” mean that the lives of pastors and deacons must be lived in a way that no one can charge and prove that a pastor or deacon is living in ways contrary to the gospel. A man of God who is above reproach is not sinlessly perfect, but he is also not one who uses his freedom in Christ as an opportunity for the flesh and a cover-up for evil (Gal. 5:13; 1 Pet. 2:16). Rather he is committed to serve in the strength that God supplies with a view to ascribe glory to God in all that he does for the good of God’s flock.

What are the specifics of being above reproach? There are several to be considered.

### *The Husband of One Wife*

A key part of God’s care for his people is that he gives them shepherds who are men after God’s heart (Jer. 3:15). To be after God’s heart is to have a steadfast commitment to patterning one’s life according to God’s will. Few things in life show such a commitment as clearly as a person’s devotion to sexual purity. In 1 Thessalonians 4:5 Paul teaches that unbelievers are dominated by passions of lust because they do not know God. It is therefore no surprise that Paul would say that “an overseer must be. . . the husband of one wife.” Being a husband of one wife is a specific aspect of what it means to be above reproach. It is significant that the first thing Paul mentions in detailing the meaning of “above reproach” is the elder’s or elder-candidate’s marital relationship. The same progression of thought is seen in Titus 1:6 where the first specification that Paul provides after saying elders are to be above reproach is that such a person must be “*the husband of one wife*” (Tit. 1:6). The requirement is no less urgent for deacons since Paul equally commands that “deacons each be the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:12).

But what does Paul mean when he says an overseer or deacon must be “a husband of one wife?”<sup>4</sup> Some have argued that this verse indicates that a man who is married to more than one woman (i.e., a polygamist) is disqualified from the office of elder. Polygamy certainly disqualifies an individual from the office of pastor or deacon, but it is doubtful that Paul had polygamy in mind. In 1 Timothy 5:9, Paul uses a parallel phrase when he says that a widow should be enlisted for financial help from the church if she was “the wife of one husband.” Not only was polygamy rare in Paul’s day, but there is no evidence to indicate the existence

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<sup>4</sup> In this paragraph I am following authors such as William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), 170-173.

of marriages of one woman to multiple men. So, when Paul speaks of being a husband of one wife or a wife of one husband, it seems unlikely that Paul was talking about polygamy or polyandry. Others have argued that Paul was saying that anyone who has been divorced and remarried is barred from holding the office of elder. But by this logic, anyone who ever failed in any of the requirements of eldership at a previous point in life would be disqualified from the office of elder, even if it took place prior to becoming a Christian. Still other interpreters have argued that Paul is suggesting that an overseer must not be single. This of course cannot be Paul's point given that Paul himself was single and encouraged others in ministry to embrace a life of singleness because singleness frees up the overseer to care for the church (1 Cor. 7:8). What then does Paul mean by the phrase, "an overseer must be. . . the husband of one wife?" Paul means that anyone who would serve as a pastor or deacon must have shown a consistent pattern of faithfulness in sexual purity. If the individual is married his marital relationship must be so honorable that he is highly regarded in the community. As such, he presents no chance of bringing shame if called up to serve as an elder. A single-hearted devotion to sexual purity, and if married, faithfulness to his wife, is a requirement for eldership and for the diaconate.

The age we live in provides an alarming and endless list of opportunities for people to indulge in sexual sin. Besides all that the internet advertises there exists a high frequency of scandals of moral failures in the area of sexual immorality, including among pastors. These realities have the effect of eroding a believer's Spirit-given capacity to feel deep contrition for sexual sin. It is possible to become desensitized to the ugliness of sexual (and other) sin because the culture indulges in these things and "gives approval to others who practice them" (Rom. 1:31). But pastors and deacons must remember that they are called to lead local manifestations of Christ's bride for whom God's will is "your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God" (1 Thess. 4:4-5) The church is a community in the midst of which "sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named . . . , as is proper among saints" (Eph. 5:3). The church is to be the city built on a hill, which displays the beauty of sexual purity produced by the power of the gospel. And therefore, pastors and deacons must give great energy toward setting "the believers an example in . . . purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). Pastors and deacons have the unique opportunity to show the world that a man in a position of authority can relate with young women in their community "as sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim. 5:2). If the world cannot see such in the lives of people called to serve God's church,

then the world has nowhere else to look. Such a lack of purity serves to discredit the witness of the church and the ministry of gospel. Therefore, one important fight that a pastor or deacon must never relent in is the fight against all the allurements of lust, pornography, fornication, adultery, and the countless other sexual temptations. The realities at stake are simply too serious to do otherwise: the honor of Christ, the integrity of the church, and clear testimony to the trustworthiness of the gospel are at stake.

### *Sober-minded and Self-controlled*

Paul clearly requires everyone who would aspire to be a pastor in God's church to be marked by sober mindedness and self-control. These two terms are close in meaning. To be sober minded means to be levelheaded, to be characterized by a calmness and sensibleness that befits the high dignity of the office of pastor and ultimately of the glory of Jesus, "the chief Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:4). Self-control is similar but pertains more to resisting the pull toward gratifying all the impulses and desires churning inside and the external invitation and stimulation that the world provides. Proverbs states that the vulnerability of a man without self-control is comparable to a city whose walls have been broken down (Prov. 25:28). Gospel witness in any given place is always at great risk of being undermined if a man marked by such vulnerability is publicly appointed to the office of pastor.

We should note here that these qualifications are not reserved for a select few in the church. The call to be sober-minded is a key aspect of working "out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). By being sober minded we keep ourselves from becoming puffed up because of a particular spiritual gift we have, or the measure of grace given us in the exercise of the gift (Rom. 12:3). Sobriety will help protect us against the spiritual and moral sleepiness that characterizes the world in which we live (1 Thess. 5:6). Through being sober minded we show that we belong to the day and not the night (1 Thess. 5:8). One important way that we set our hope fully on the grace that will be brought to believers at the revelation of Jesus Christ is by being sober minded (1 Pet. 1:13). The kind of prayerfulness that must mark our lives, especially in light of the end of all things being at hand, demands that we be sober minded (1 Pet. 4:7). As one who had been sorely attacked by the devil (cf. Luke 22:31-34, 54-62), Peter knew that it takes a Christian who is sober minded and watchful to keep from being devoured by our adversary in all his prowling around (1 Pet. 5:8). Therefore, sobriety is not only commanded for pastors. All of God's people are summoned to sober mindedness. In that sense, those appointed to serve as deacons are equally called to sobriety. In fact, the call for deacons to be individuals who are "not addicted to much

wine” (1 Tim. 3:8) but those who are “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3) communicates the same idea. The same is true about self-control. All God’s people, including deacons, are called to live “self-controlled. . . lives in the present age” (Tit. 2:12). It is therefore not a surprise that Paul would call older men, young men, and young women to be “self-controlled” (Tit. 2:2, 5, 6). As mentioned above self-control and sober mindedness are twin traits that help God’s people to be effective in prayer during these last days in which we live (1 Pet. 4:7).

Imagine a church that is led by someone or a group of people who are frivolous and whimsical in their character. Following such leadership as a member of a church will be very difficult at best. Redeemed and Spirit-indwelt people are those who can discern spiritual reality and over time will become very aggrieved by a hypocritical façade. But they flourish and thrive under a leadership that they have come to know and respect as having a ballast and stamina that comes from the centrality of God. When people watch a man go through various seasons and situations and keep his head, they come to know that such a one is a pastor whose preaching and counseling and leadership they must take seriously. Similarly watching a deacon who has shown evidence of holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience (1 Tim. 3:9) leads many in the church to give thanks to God (Rom. 16:4). That is why Paul commands that every aspiring pastor or deacon must be someone who is marked by sober mindedness and self-control. In fact, he will say in his last letter to Timothy that in light of the fact that a time will come when men will not endure sound doctrine but seek teaching that tickles ears and turn away from the faith, Timothy is to “always be sober-minded” (2 Tim. 4:5). A crucial means by which God works sanctification in His church is to exemplify for the believers what He calls them to in the lives of pastors and deacons. This is why pastors are called to show themselves “in all respects to be a model of good works” (Tit. 2:7). If church members cannot see sober mindedness and self-control in the lives of pastors and deacons, they have nowhere else to see it. Because just like we once were, so is the world around us: “foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another” (Tit. 3:3). But now “that the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, [and] he saved us” (Tit. 3:4-5) we must live lives that are marked by self-control and sober mindedness. That is a critical way to wait for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus (Tit. 2:13), and pastors and deacons must lead the way in living as such (1 Tim. 4:16).

### *Respectable and Hospitable*

The word translated “respectable” in the ESV describes a person “having characteristics or qualities that evoke admiration or delight.”<sup>5</sup> It is used to speak of how godly women ought to adorn themselves in distinction from women who do not profess godliness (1 Tim. 2:9). The requirement for an elder to be respectable refers to far more than physical appearance such as clothing. The reference is to an honorableness that derives from a life lived in joyful and explicit submission to all of God’s word in all areas of life. There is something profoundly admirable and delightful about a man whose life is an exemplary reflection of the truth he teaches from God’s word. People want to hear more of such a person’s teaching. They want to learn from him regarding how to think about their marriage, their children, their finances, their life, death, sexuality, technology, and everything else. In fact, such a person has a wide-open door with people to be able to say to them, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Or “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:9). Or again, “You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers” (1 Thess. 2:10).

Contrast such honorableness with the life of a man who is not watching his life and doctrine; someone who is not laboring to see that there is a one-to-one correspondence between his teaching and his life. Such a pastor is not respectable. Period! Jesus once told his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice” (Matt. 23:2-3). What a tragedy if this could be said to the members of a church with reference to their pastor! Imagine just how offensively hypocritical it would feel, if one of these Pharisees were a pastor at a church and tried to rebuke any of his members for hypocrisy. A person like that has no place in the pastorate (1 Tim. 3:2), but if for some strange reason he became a pastor, he would lack the moral authority and, therefore, the legitimacy to provide pastoral leadership. He would become a reason for “the word of God . . . [to] be reviled” (Titus 2:5). Few things are more crippling to the stability, joy, and growth of a church than the life of a hypocrite posing as a pastor. Such a pastor is among the worst kinds of resounding gongs and clanging cymbals there can be.

Paul does not only say a pastor is to be respectable but also that he is to be hospitable. Many people understand hospitality as an attitude of warmth and

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<sup>5</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 561.



welcome towards someone who comes to their house at short or even without notice. Such warmth and welcome may include offering the visitor something to eat and drink. It could even include having them stay the night, or in some cases, several days. Christians and particularly pastors are called to show hospitality in these ways too. In fact, the main word for hospitality in the NT literally means “lover of strangers.” The author of the book of Hebrews urges us to “not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2). The kind of hospitality that the Bible says must mark the life of a pastor certainly includes being warm and welcoming when a stranger shows up at your house, but also surpasses it. It includes welcoming those who are not strangers. We know this because Peter tells Christians to “show hospitality to one another without grumbling” (1 Pet. 4:9). This means inviting someone you serve with in the same ministry at church, or simply know as a fellow church member, to your house and sharing a meal together and in the course of eating sharpening each other in the gospel as iron sharpens iron (Prov. 27:17). The early believers grasped the powerful impact of this and practiced it so regularly that Luke tells us that “day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.” (Acts 2:46-47a).

When a pastor is marked by such hospitality, he helps to point people to Jesus who poured out his own blood for many for the forgiveness of sins and has invited us in and promised “I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matt. 26:29; cf. Isa. 25:6). God has prepared a rich feast in which we will share with Jesus. The hospitality of a pastor is meant, in part, to point believers to and remind them of that coming banquet. Furthermore, when a pastor is marked by this kind of hospitality and gives faithful biblical instruction on the subject, the same will slowly but surely spread through the church. Before too long the whole church will more fully fit the description that Luke gives in Acts 2:46-47. When that happened in Acts, along with signs and wonders and the overall godly lives of believers, it was a powerful authentication of the gospel. The result? The Bible says, “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47b). It may well be that our lack of success in evangelism is due, in part, to the fact that the world is not seeing in the church the kind of community that the world of the apostles was seeing in the first believers. This situation may also be, in part, because we as pastors have failed to set the kind of example in this area that our members need to see and emulate, through which the Holy Spirit takes the world by storm through the pow-

er of the gospel. Once again, the command to be respectable and hospitable is applicable to all believers and, therefore, to deacons as well.

### *Not a Drunkard*

The Bible has the most terrifying words for people whose lives are dominated by the works of the flesh (or the fallen nature). Such include those who are addicted to much wine. Paul says to the Corinthians, “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one” (1 Cor. 5:11). For Paul, it is beyond question, according to 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, that people whose lives are dominated by extravagant sins will face eternal damnation:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

He sounds the same dire warning in Galatians 5:19-21, saying,

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

What an open denial of the gospel, therefore, it is for a person to hold the office that calls him to be an example for the believers in lifestyle (1 Tim. 4:12) and yet be a drunkard! There is an even deeper problem. A person who is addicted to much wine shows that he seeks ultimate joy and fulfillment not from God, but from wine! To seek ultimate joy in anything other than God is the essence of idolatry (Rom. 1:21). The Bible calls us to a very different vision of the source of true and lasting satisfaction. The Psalmist testifies, “Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. For our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name” (Psa. 33:20-21). He refers to God as his “exceeding joy” (Psa. 43:4). We are commanded to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4). Therefore, the source of a believer’s joy must be in the living God through Jesus Christ.

What about the Bible's claim that wine gladdens the heart? The Bible does indeed teach that wine gladdens the heart: "You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart" (Psa. 104:14-15). These verses are part of a Psalm that extols the splendor and majesty of God by recounting His amazing providential care for creation. In His care for creation, God causes His grass to grow for animals that eat grass and gives man all the varied forms of agriculture so he can grow food. Part of what God provides through man's agricultural enterprise is wine which gladdens man's heart. Little wonder then that Paul will tell the idolatrous people of Lystra that even though God let the nations go their own way "he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). Sadly, the good gifts of food and wine can be corrupted and turned into idols by our fallen appetites. Even though wine is said to gladden the heart (see also Eccl. 10:16-19), the consistent theme of scripture is that God's people should be glad in God above all and not primarily in something he gives them. Any lesser joy can be righteously sought only if it serves to increase our joy in God. The thrill from excessive consumption of wine certainly never increases any person's joy in God. We know this from the way the rest of the Bible speaks about drunkenness. Rebellion against parental authority was often associated with gluttony and drunkenness (Deut. 21:20-21). Furthermore, the wise man urges his son not to be "among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags" (Prov. 23:20-22). In fact, there is lamentation for a land whose "princes feast in the morning!" but blessing for a land whose king "is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness!" (Eccl. 10:16-17). The Bible does not only say that wine gladdens the heart; it also says that wine is "a mocker" (Prov. 20:1). When a man is overtaken by wine "In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder" (Prov. 23:29-35). How tragic when such is true of a pastor. Profitable ministry flows from being filled, not with wine (for that is debauchery) but with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). We do eternal good to ourselves and our people when we consistently refuse to be given to much wine. We show that we take very seriously the warning of our Lord when He said that unless we are watchful, our hearts are in danger of being "weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day [may] come upon you suddenly like a trap" (Luke 21:34).

As with the preceding character qualifications, all believers are called to abstain from drunkenness (Eph. 5:18) and those who do not repent will be

condemned forever. So again, this is applicable to deacons as well as to pastors. In fact, Paul explicitly spells it out saying, a deacon must be someone who is “not addicted to much wine” (1 Tim. 3:8).

### *Not Violent, Not Quarrelsome but Gentle*

Besides caring for the church, the pastoral office is also meant to give the world a concrete picture of Jesus as the Shepherd of God’s people. God has purposed for people to see a manifestation of the character of Christ as the Good Shepherd of God’s flock when they look at a human pastor in a local church. This is why in a context where Peter exhorts elders to “shepherd [literally, pastor] the flock of God” (1 Pet. 5:2), he refers to Jesus as the “Chief Shepherd” (literally, Chief Pastor). Peter heard Jesus refer to himself as “the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11, 14). So, the character and dignity of Jesus Christ, the Chief Pastor, must shine through the life of everyone who serves as a pastor. When that happens, the church is blessed, and God is honored.

One aspect of Christ’s character that must be seen in the life of a pastor is “the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor 10:1). Matthew’s explanation for why Jesus often commanded people not to make Him known after healing them (Matt. 12:18-21) is that He knew that He came in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy which said,

Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope.

Jesus self-consciously disavowed quarreling as a means of establishing His Kingdom. He also rejected violence. He told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 19:36). In fact, his disciples missed this and used violence (Luke 22:47-53), but Jesus resisted violence even when his arresters came out as against a robber with swords and clubs (Luke 22:52). Jesus’ repudiation of violence was not the result of lack of access to weapons and strength for a fight. Rather Jesus knew that He could “appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels” (Matt. 26:53).

Jesus' strategy for establishing the kingdom, namely a refusal to use quarrelling and violence, guides the pastor for true victory in spiritual warfare. Similarly, in 2 Timothy 2:24-26, Paul wrote,

The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Also, quarrelling about words is a mark of someone who "teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words" (1 Tim. 6:3-4). A violent or quarrelsome pastor is a terrible distortion of the image of the humble, foot-washing, servant-hearted and obedient Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. We follow one who is a Lion but gave himself as a Lamb to be slain. He conquered by being crushed for iniquity. We will do well if we follow His example of meekness and gentleness.

It is without question that living a life that disavows violence and quarrelsomeness and pursues gentleness must be true of deacons and of every Christian. Again, we return to Acts 6 where the apostles said deacons should be people full of the Spirit and of wisdom. This meant that such individuals are bearing the fruit of the Spirit, including gentleness. We even see how that worked itself out in the life of Stephen, who while being stoned did not retaliate but prayed for God to forgive his killers (Acts 7:60). Therefore, deacons are equally called to be individuals marked by gentleness and live lives that are free of any kind of violence or quarrelsomeness.

### *Not a Lover of Money*

A person who is a lover of money cannot serve God. The Lord Jesus expressly said, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matt. 6:24). No matter how hard they may try to polish things up externally, if a person is in the ministry for money, they cannot serve God. Usually, it is just a matter of time and their true drive will become evident to everyone. No one can conceal their love for money forever, espe-

cially in the ministry of the gospel. “The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later” (1 Tim. 5:24). Because anyone who loves money cannot serve God, it is no surprise that God’s word authoritatively declares that a pastor must be one who is not a lover of money (1 Tim. 3:3). The Bible further states that a pastor “must not be . . . greedy for gain” (Titus 1:7). According to Peter, one mark of faithful pastoral ministry is that the pastor shepherds God’s flock “not for shameful gain, but eagerly” (1 Pet. 5:2). Those who think “that godliness is a means of gain” disqualify themselves from the office of pastors because it is “godliness with contentment [that] is great gain” (1 Tim. 6:6). This means that for all believers and certainly for pastors, “if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (1 Tim. 6:8).

Therefore, pastors must be “not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God” speaking the truth (2 Cor. 2:16). Paul’s example in this regard is extremely instructive. He stated that “we renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). In financial as well as in other matters, a pastor is to aim “at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man” (2 Cor. 8:21). When temptations seek to lure us away from faithful pastoral labors and turn us into peddlers of God’s grace and word, we must not fall for such ruinous offers. Rather, after the manner of Peter we are to say, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!” (Acts 8:20). A prophet who will “cry ‘Peace’ when they have something to eat, but declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths” (Micah 3:5) is an abomination and for such a one “the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 13; 2 Pet. 2:17).

Once again, believers are called to “keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for God has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb. 13:5). A believer fights the world’s allure to greed because he has been taught by God’s Spirit that a man’s “life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). As a result, such a one will not “lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19-21). The last thing a believer needs is a pastor who by their words and lifestyle undermines that safe and secure position. I Timothy 6:9-10 declares,

Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

Of course, the same goes for individuals called to serve the Lord's church as deacons. Paul commands that a deacon must not be someone "greedy for dishonest gain" (1 Tim. 3:8). In fact, Paul uses the same word here talking about deacons as he uses in Titus 1:7 (αἰσχροκερδῆς) to talk about pastors.<sup>6</sup> This again shows that the standard for this character qualification is the same for deacons as it is for pastors.

### *A Good Manager of His Household*

A pastor must be gifted to manage, to care for God's church as a leader who rules and directs a local community of God's people well. One helpful indicator of a man's suitability for the pastorate is their Spirit-given ability to lead. The Spirit endows some individuals in the body with a supernatural ability to lead. Such individuals are called to lead with zeal (Rom. 12:8). Not everyone gifted to lead is called to serve as a pastor, but everyone called to serve as a pastor must be gifted to lead. This is why pastors are described as people who labor in the midst of the church and are over the church in the Lord (1 Thess. 5:12). The Holy Spirit appoints overseers so that they might care for (that is, pastor) God's church (Acts 20:28). The expectation is for overseers to rule well (1 Tim. 5:17). It is a great grace that God has not left us clueless as to how to discern a potential elder candidate's giftedness in the area of leadership. The church is to look at the way the individual manages his own household. Specifically, the church is to look to see if the individual's children are submissive and if the candidate upholds his respectableness in the course of rearing his children. What good is it to appoint someone as pastor whose children are being exasperated and embittered at home from his harsh leadership? Such an appointment may set the church members up for the same kind of exasperation or maybe worse. If a man's children are faithful and are not known to be incorrigible or insubordinate

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<sup>6</sup> Peter uses the cognate adverb (αἰσχροκερδῶς) in 1 Pet. 5:2 to describe how pastors must conduct themselves with respect to money.

(Titus 1:6), there is good reason to believe such a person could serve effectively as a pastor, all other things considered.

We should note here that Paul is not demanding that a pastor be married and have at least two children (see 1 Cor. 9:5). Rather, he is saying that a person who is married and does have children must show proof of dignified leadership in his own household before he can be trusted to lead in God's church. If the individual is single and does not have children, we will obviously simply consider the other character qualifications. Also, their ability to manage may possibly be observed in other spheres. For those who are married, how a person manages their home is a reliable indicator of how they will attempt to lead outside the home. An authoritarian leader in the home will not magically acquire the meekness of Christ if appointed to the office of pastor.

Paul's various descriptions of his own pastoral work in terms of parental care and provision for children helps to highlight the necessity for a pastor to be a proven and reliable family man. Paul says to the Corinthians, "Children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children" (2 Cor. 12:14; cf. Prov. 13:22). The image he used to explain his work among the Thessalonians was that of "a father with his children." Paul "exhorted . . . and encouraged . . . [and] charged [the Thessalonians] to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls [them] into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess. 2:11–12). While it is true that Paul did not learn household management from personally raising biological children of his own, it is also true, as mentioned above, that those who have been given wives and children and who fail to exercise this kind of fatherly responsibility in the home will hurt the church if they are appointed to the office of pastor. As Robert Yarbrough has noted "Parental authority involves wise and nurturing guidance that will evoke devotion, affection, and loyalty in return."<sup>7</sup> The same is true of pastoral authority. Paul speaks of the "authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you" (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). The requirement for an aspiring church officer to be above reproach includes leading their home not according to the whims of an authoritarian, self-serving husband who threatens his children into submission, but according to the attitude of a loving servant leader who cares for his household in a manner that is exemplary and worthy of respect.<sup>8</sup> This sort of servant leadership is required of pastors (1 Tim. 3:4) and deacons (1 Tim. 3:12) and, indeed, of every man (Eph. 6:4).

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<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; London: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2018), 199.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



### *Mature and Well Thought of by Outsiders*

Every local church exists in real time and space. Interactions with the unbelieving world are inevitable for believers in Jesus. Paul acknowledges this in his letter to the Thessalonians. He urges them to abound more and more in love for one another, to live quietly, to mind one's own business and to do gainful work "so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one" (1 Thess. 4:12). He also told the Colossians to "walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time" (Col. 4:5). Peter instructs his readers to "keep your conduct *among the Gentiles honorable*, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Pet. 2:12). Evidently, the apostles believed that any thought of not interacting with the unbelieving world is meaningless "since then you would need to go out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:9-10). In other words, Christians are never thought of in the Bible as a bizarre sect that is supposed to seclude itself from dealing with the world in the ordinary matters of life. Being in the world and being conformed to the patterns of this world are very different matters. Christians are commanded to shun the latter. They are to strive to "not be conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). In this regard, Demas is a bad example because even though he served alongside Paul (Col. 4:14; Phlm. 24) he later fell in love with this world and "deserted" Paul (2 Tim. 4:9). Believers on the contrary are to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior" (Tit. 2:10), so that "the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled" (1 Tim. 6:1; Tit 2:5). While it is true that we will suffer ridicule, rejection, harm, and perhaps even suffer martyrdom for our faith in Jesus (2 Tim. 3:12), it is also true that many outsiders will think well of believers who live dignified lives as followers of Jesus Christ.

All this gives the context for understanding the requirement that an elder candidate must be one who is not a new convert. A new convert has not been tested. His character is unproven and there is a risk of him tarnishing the reputation of the church and undermining the witness of the gospel. Furthermore, if elder candidates have been believers for a considerable amount of time and yet have not consistently conducted themselves in a way that is in keeping with the gospel, then shame will be brought upon the church through their assuming the role of pastor. That is why it is required that an elder candidate "must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:7). A church that ordains a new convert to the office of pastor risks damaging the credibility of her own gospel witness. A church that appoints a pastor who has a questionable or

even shameful reputation with outsiders seriously compromises her own integrity and the effectiveness of her witness. Further, shame and discouragement often come to the church members when their pastor is mocked outside the church as one with a disgraceful character marked by underhanded ways. One does not have to be the most notorious scoundrel to bring shame on the church and the Name of the Lord if made a pastor. Merely shady or questionable dealings with the world by a person appointed as a pastor is enough to discredit the message of the gospel. Every local church must diligently consider a person's reputation with the outside world before they appoint him to the office of elder.

The requirements to be mature and well thought of by outsiders have significant implications for a person invited to consider serving as a pastor. If a brother receives such an invitation and he is aware of things in his life from his dealings with outsiders that will bring disgrace to the Lord's name, he should insistently refuse to be appointed. He should rather be open about any such underhandedness and seek repentance and restoration. He could still end up serving in the role at a future time if the Lord wills. If he conceals what he knows and goes ahead and accepts the appointment, he risks going on in hypocrisy that will ultimately hurt him and the church in even deeper ways. Unless such sins are repented of, no matter how long the show of being a pastor continues, the person is at risk of hearing the frightening verdict, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). Deacons likewise are to be known for a good reputation with outsiders. The other qualifications of deacons (such as holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, being tested first, and being faithful in all things) indicate that a young convert should not be appointed to the office of deacon.

### **A Qualification Unique to the Office of Pastor**

Finally, we come to a qualification that is unique to the office of pastor. The pastor is to be "able to teach." Deacons are entrusted with a ministry that does not require that they be able to teach. This qualification is conspicuously absent from the list of qualifications for deacons. On the other hand, in 1 Timothy 3:2 we read that a pastor must be able to teach. Many very well-meaning lovers of the church, in some cases even godly men, who are not gifted to teach may seek or be urged by others to be a pastor. However, if the Lord has not given someone the gift of teaching, they cannot profitably discharge the duties of the pastoral office. There is a sense in which all Christians are "able to instruct one another" (Rom. 15:14), but the unique ministry to

teach God's word to a local church is not entrusted to every believer. The necessity for a pastor to be able to teach cannot be over-emphasized because the teaching function of the pastoral office is absolutely crucial for the life of every local church (2 Tim. 3:14-4:5).

"Able to teach" here simply means "skillful in teaching." This qualification is helpfully explained in the rest of the pastoral letters. The first place we get help on the meaning of "able to teach" is the parallel list of pastoral qualifications in Titus. There Paul says that the overseer "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Tit. 1:9).

According to Titus 1:9, "able to teach" has nothing to do with being the most formally educated, even theologically educated, individual in a church. It means far more than being the individual with the greatest public speaking skills. It is first and foremost defined at the level of the heart. Someone who is able to teach is someone who "holds firm to the trustworthy word" (Tit. 1:9) and holds to it "as taught" (Tit 1:9). One temptation in ministry is the urge to seek to amaze people with wonderful, never-before-heard wisdom. If a person is too vulnerable to the appeal to be dazzling instead of holding to the trustworthy word as taught, he will ultimately fail to teach as the Bible commands. This is because yielding to such a temptation usually leads a person to start embracing ideas without discernment since he is more concerned with amazing people than he is with building up the faith of God's blood-bought people.

There is a twofold purpose for holding to the trustworthy word as taught. The first is so that the pastor "may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine" (Tit. 1:9). This means that "able to teach" includes a pastor's ability to explain God's word with clarity and show how what he explains should shape the day-to-day lives of God's people. The Bible teaches that believers are "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Only one thing is able to equip God's people to accomplish these good works and that one thing is the word of God: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Furthermore, the one offensive weapon Christians have in the warfare "against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12) is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph 6:17). A church will not excel in good deeds

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<sup>9</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 240.

and will not be strong in the Lord and the power of His might, if her members are not correctly taught the Word. They will not be taught if their pastors are not able to give instruction in sound doctrine.

The second aspect of the purpose for why a pastor must hold to the trustworthy word as taught is so that he may be able “to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). It is a given in pastoral ministry that some will come along seeking “to teach a different doctrine” (1 Tim 6:3; 1:3). They will speak “twisted things to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30), “desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions” (1 Tim 1:7). Such may even come “disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:13). This is not surprising, “for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). We should expect that his servants will also often disguise themselves as servants of righteousness” (2 Cor. 11:14-15 cf. Gal. 1:8). What is a pastor’s responsibility in the face of such things? He is “to rebuke those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9) the “sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. 6:3). He is not only to know right doctrine but is to know it well enough and hold onto it tenaciously enough that he can easily spot out error and sound the alarm for God’s people. Of course, rebuking does not mean screaming at people. It means setting forth the truth with clarity and boldness in the face of error (see, for example, Gal. 2:11-14 and 2 Tim. 2:24-26).

When the occasion arises for a pastor to confront doctrinal deviation and (because of the fear of man or the desire to be liked or the attempt to protect his position or for whatever other reason) he refrains from rebuking persons who are twisting the truth, the church members will be left to wonder if he can be trusted as a leader. If this becomes a pattern, he will eventually lose the legitimacy to carry out any meaningful and beneficial ministry in that church. On the other hand, if a pastor leads as he should when his church is assailed “by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Eph. 4:14), much good will come to the church. Also, the pastor will grow in his own confidence in the gospel as he watches God exalt the authority of God’s word among those who are truly God’s sheep (cf. Acts 5:11). Such cannot happen if the pastor is not one who is gifted by God to teach.

Asking if a person is able to teach and if other believers have seen a gift of teaching in them is an important step in the process of discerning whether someone is called to be a pastor. If God has not gifted someone to teach, then we can safely and confidently conclude that God has not called them to be a pastor. While not all those gifted to teach are called to be pastors, all those called to be pastors are gifted to teach. Therefore, an elder must be a

NT Ezra: one who has set his mind to study the law of the Lord, to do it and to teach God's statutes to God's people (Ezra 7:10). He must be one who labors "in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim 5:17).

### **Conclusion**

Some things will inevitably vary from place to place and even from church to church. These include music style, Lord Supper elements, whether baptism is done in pools or streams, whether worshippers sit on mats or on cushioned pews, and so on. However, the issues of who leads the church, and how they lead are not negotiable. To treat these otherwise or handle them in culturally accommodating ways that deviate from biblical standards is to be unfaithful. If we contextualize at the expense of being faithful to what is clearly taught in the Bible, we are being unfaithful even if we have the best of intentions.

PART TWO



CULTURAL  
IMPLICATIONS



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## CHAPTER 3

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### THE CHURCH IN AFRICA AND BEYOND THROUGHOUT HISTORY

- Coye Still -

Christianity and Africa have always been connected. We can see the connection in Jesus' childhood. To escape Herod's wrath, Joseph took the child Jesus and his mother to Egypt as an angel had instructed him. After Herod's death, Joseph brought Jesus back to the land of Israel, again, as an angel directed. This was in fulfillment of a word from the Lord: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1). The prophet Hosea had spoken this word 700 years before Jesus' birth. It pointed back, of course, to God bringing his first-born son, the nation of Israel (Exo. 4:22), out of slavery in Egypt. It also pointed ahead from Hosea's day to the unique Son of the living God, Jesus, being called out of Egypt—that is, out of Africa.

We can also see the connection between Christianity and Africa on the way to Golgotha. The soldiers who led Jesus out "found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross" (Matt. 27:32). The ancient city of Cyrene was in what we now know as Libya. We would like to have more information about Simon and his sons, Alexander and Rufus (Mark 14:21). Were they or did they become followers of Jesus? Do the gospel accounts mention them by name because they were well known as members of the Christian community? We do not know. We do know, however, that a man of northern Africa helped carry the cross of Jesus.

Then we can see Christianity's connections with Africa throughout the book of Acts. There are residents of Egypt and Libya who heard the gospel on Pentecost (Acts 2:10), the Ethiopian man who received baptism (Acts 8:26-40), the preachers from Cyrene (Acts 11:20), "Simeon who was called Niger,"<sup>1</sup> and "Lucius

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<sup>1</sup> Or "Simon (called the Black Man)" (NLT). The Africa Study Bible's "Narrative Timeline," p. 1944, comments that Simeon "was likely from one of the regions known today as Tunisia or Algeria."



of Cyrene” (Acts 13:1). Then there is Apollos, one of the great preachers of New Testament times. He was an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, and he was from Alexandria (Acts 18:24), a city in Egypt.

Not only have Christianity and Africa always been connected, but churches have been gathering on the continent since the first century. This means that African churches have been in spiritual fellowship with churches in other regions of the world for nearly two thousand years.

What is the story of the African church in relation to the church worldwide? This chapter is devoted to telling portions of this story. It will conclude by suggesting what may be one of God’s great purposes in granting remarkable growth and multiplication of African churches in the last century or so.

## **THE EARLY CHURCH IN AFRICA**

In New Testament times, and for several centuries afterward, Northern Africa was a Roman province. Roman settlers dwelt among the Berber, Punic, and other indigenous peoples. In large cities as well as in smaller communities throughout this vast region, churches began very early in Christian history. Alexandria, Egypt, is one of the cities in which this happened.

### **The Church in Alexandria**

Tradition has it that John Mark pioneered gospel preaching and planted the church in Alexandria. This Mark was the cousin of Barnabas and the author of the Gospel of Mark that we have in our New Testament.

Much had happened in Alexandria prior to Mark’s arrival to prepare the city to be a great center of African Christianity in the first and following centuries. The city was founded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC by Alexander the Great, a brilliant Greek general and ruler. The Greek language became common in the city and would become the lingua franca in the Mediterranean world by the 1st century AD. Alexandria had a large and busy seaport and abounded with economic opportunity that spurred population growth in the city. Jews settled in the city in significant numbers. They maintained their homes well, prospered in business, and built synagogues. Some of the pagans in Alexandria were intrigued and impressed with the Jewish religion. They saw the light of truth in the Jewish scriptures, and some began to revere the God of the scriptures.

In fact, the origin of the Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX)<sup>2</sup> has traditionally been associated with Alexandria. A document known as the Letter of Aristeas tells the story.<sup>3</sup> According to Aristeas, the librarian of the Egyptian King Ptolemy Philadelphus sent to the high priest in Jerusalem requesting that seventy-two Jewish elders, six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, come to Alexandria.<sup>4</sup> The king wanted them to translate the five books of Moses from Hebrew into Greek for his library in the city. After a great banquet to celebrate their arrival, the elders began work. With unanimous agreement among them, the translation “was accomplished in seventy-two days, as though this coincidence had been intended.”<sup>5</sup> The king’s librarian then assembled the Jews of Alexandria and read the translation aloud, after which the Jews applauded, and the rulers of the people declared it to be perfectly accurate.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, all the books that are in our Old Testament were translated and included in the LXX, although this process took place over quite a long time, in various locations, and with the involvement of many translators. We should acknowledge that most scholars today believe that the Letter of Aristeas was written long after the events that it describes and is historically inaccurate in various details.<sup>7</sup> We are unlikely to ever know with certainty who initiated the translation and for what purpose. We do know that the LXX became the Bible for Greek speaking Jews in the synagogues. We also know that the apostles quoted and preached from the LXX and that it was used broadly in churches in the first century. And we know this: the beginnings of the LXX are associated with Alexandria and, therefore, with Africa.

A brilliant and well-known Jewish philosopher named Philo lived in Alexandria until his death in AD 50. He was a master of Greek and interpreted the monotheistic faith of the Jews to the Gentiles. His message may have helped to prepare the way for the word of truth, the gospel of Jesus Christ, that Mark would soon come preaching.

As God had prepared Alexandria for the gospel, so he had prepared Mark, the cousin of Barnabas and the author of “The Gospel According to Mark,” to preach the gospel in that great city. Mark assisted and learned from

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<sup>2</sup> The word “Septuagint” means “seventy.” The abbreviation for the Septuagint is the Roman numeral LXX. The name is related to the tradition that seventy-two elders translated the Torah, the five books of the law. LXX (or seventy) is the rounded number representing the seventy-two.

<sup>3</sup> Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Imitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, digital, 2015), Part 1: The History of the Septuagint. Also see, H. St. J. Thackeray, *The Letter of Aristeas: Translated into English with an Introduction and Notes* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904).

<sup>4</sup> Thackeray, page 15.

<sup>5</sup> Thackeray, page 53.

<sup>6</sup> Thackeray, page 54.

<sup>7</sup> Jobes and Silva, Part 1.

Barnabas and Paul. He had also been influenced profoundly by Simon Peter. In fact, Peter's eyewitness testimony regarding the ministry of Jesus was the basis for Mark's gospel and Peter considered Mark to be his son in the faith (1 Pet. 5:13). So, Mark had served closely with two of the great New Testament preachers and teachers, Peter and Paul.

As Mark preached Christ in the power of the Spirit in Alexandria, people repented and believed. He gathered the believers into a church of which he was the first pastor. What he had heard and knew to be true of Christ, he entrusted to faithful men who were able to teach others also.<sup>8</sup> Christianity thrived in the city and the church grew. Eventually, a school began for theological training. It grew strong and large under gifted leaders and teachers.

There was also a warm response to the gospel in other North African cities such as Carthage and Hippo. Not all cities had the wealth and notoriety of Alexandria. Not all developed a catechetical and ministerial training school of renown. Nonetheless, in many cities and towns the Spirit worked, the word of the Lord prospered, and churches multiplied.

Of course, not everyone was happy about the increasing Christian presence. In Alexandria, people were offended that many were turning away from the old gods. They set out to rid the city of Mark and his preaching. He is said to have died as a martyr, perhaps in AD 68. If so, he led the way for other loyal believers by shedding his blood for Christ on African soil.

### **Courage in the Face of Persecution**

Often, persecution within the Roman Empire was in response to Christian refusal to participate in sacrifices to the pagan gods and the emperor's statue. Many of the Romans were baffled by the Christians' refusals. From the point of view of the pagan officials, the requirement of Christians to toss a pinch of incense on a statue or present an offering to the priest of a god should have been easy to meet. The officials wondered why this simple ritual was such a problem for the Christians. Were they atheists? Were they unpatriotic? Did they not care that the gods might withdraw favor from the city for neglect of the sacrifices? The Romans did not even demand that the Christians believe the myths about the gods to be true. However, they did demand participation in the rituals, at the least as a civic duty. Refusal was unacceptable and required a penalty. The Christians would either sacrifice to the gods and the emperor or they would die.

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<sup>8</sup> See 2 Timothy 2:2.

Many did indeed die. Executioners' swords drew Christian blood. Beasts in the arenas tore Christian flesh. Many pagans delighted in the spectacle. Others were deeply impressed by the Christians' resolute testimony in the face of death. Model members of society in every other way, the Christians drew an uncrossable line at the point of pagan worship. They refused to give offerings to the gods. They did not refuse to give their lives for their Savior.

Among them were the Scillitan Martyrs, a group of twelve Christians from the town of Scilla in the region of Numidia. The trial for these seven men and five women took place in the city of Carthage.<sup>9</sup> The Roman governor who presided urged the Christians to offer sacrifice to the emperor. They would not. One after another, they stated their resolve: "We have no other to fear but the Lord our God, who is in heaven"; "Honor to Caesar in his capacity as Caesar, but fear to God"; "I am a Christian"; and "What I am is exactly what I want to be." The governor offered to give them more time to consider the matter carefully. One responded, "In such a just cause, there is no need for careful consideration." The governor then noticed that the Christians had a satchel with them and asked what was inside. They responded, "Books and letters of Paul, a just man." Still hoping for denials of Christ, the governor urged them to take thirty days. In a respectful tone steady with finality, one said, "I am a Christian." None of the twelve would betray their Christ, no matter how much time was given. The governor was convinced and pronounced the death sentence. Immediately, they were beheaded for the name of Christ.

In the early third century, also in Carthage, two young women, Perpetua and her slave girl, Felicitas, died together for their faith in Christ.<sup>10</sup> They were recent converts to Christianity. Perpetua was wealthy, of noble birth, the beloved daughter of a pagan father, married, and the mother of a nursing baby. Her father pleaded with her repeatedly to renounce Christ and spare him the sorrow and shame of a daughter's death as a Christian. She loved her father but would not renounce Christ for him. Her heart was broken over separation from her baby, but with resolve she committed the child to her mother's and brother's care. In the most difficult of tests, Perpetua proved her surpassing love for Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Felicitas also proved her love and loyalty to Christ. Her

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<sup>9</sup> "The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs," is perhaps the most ancient of all extant African Christian documents. See [www.livius.org/sources/content/acts-of-the-scillitan-martyrs/translation/](http://www.livius.org/sources/content/acts-of-the-scillitan-martyrs/translation/)

<sup>10</sup> See [www.ssf.org/pdf/The\\_Martyrdom\\_of\\_Saints\\_Perpetua\\_and\\_Felicitas.pdf](http://www.ssf.org/pdf/The_Martyrdom_of_Saints_Perpetua_and_Felicitas.pdf) for "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas." The heart of this document is Perpetua's journal from her imprisonment. It also includes an account of Perpetua and Felicitas' executions. A concise article, "Perpetua: High Society Believer," is available at [www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/perpetua.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/perpetua.html)

<sup>11</sup> See Matt. 10:37.

valor was equal to Perpetua's. The two women loved their Savior and they loved one another as sisters.

The thought of slave and master loving one another as sisters may give the reader pause. Slavery, of course, was a fact of life in the ancient world. It had been so in ancient Greece. It was so in the Roman world of Felicitas and Perpetua's day, but something dramatically subversive had taken place at this point. The Incarnate God living in this world as an outcast and dying for outcasts had dealt the death blow to slavery theologically.<sup>12</sup> The institution of slavery did not die legally with the death of Christ, nor would it for centuries to come. Felicitas retained the legal status of slave, but much more could be said about her identity and standing. She and Perpetua were equal in crucial ways. They had both been purchased for God by the blood of Christ, delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of the beloved Son. They knew that in the kingdom there "is neither. . . slave nor free, . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Paul urged Philemon to receive the slave Onesimus as "a beloved brother" (Phlm. 16). Felicitas and Perpetua were beloved sisters and joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17).

The two sisters loved one another profoundly and endured persecution courageously side by side. With the noble bearing proper for daughters of heaven's King, they walked together into the arena. A crazed heifer and then a tiger attacked but, remarkably, the women remained alive. An executioner used his sword to put an end to the suffering and the women entered eternity together to meet their Redeemer face to face.

The courage of the Scillitans and of Felicitas and Perpetua is the heritage of the early African churches. Champions for Christ stepped forth from church after church. They were committed to the writings of the apostles, devoted to one another, and resolute in suffering. They took up their crosses and followed Jesus. They persevered in faith through hardships. They are noble examples for Africa's churches and for churches throughout the world today.

Of course, there were some not so steadfast in faith and courage. For example, in AD 250, a storm of persecution beat upon North Africa during the reign of the emperor Decius. To avoid harassment by persecutors, some church members purchased statements attesting that they had burned incense to the Roman gods. After the storm subsided, many of these people regretted what they had done. Tension and turmoil arose over how to relate to those who had denied their faith and then asked to return to fellowship with the church.

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<sup>12</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, Part II, chapter II, "The Riddles of the Gospel."

After a long period of persecutions coming periodically in waves, an era of peace dawned. The Roman Emperor Constantine had converted to faith in Christ. He declared freedom of worship for Christians in the Edict of Milan in 313 AD. It would still be over sixty years before Christianity became the religion of the Empire, but believers now had legal protection in practicing their faith. The tide had changed dramatically. Christians had been in prison cells, in arenas with wild beasts, and on crosses. Now one of their number was on the emperor's throne in Rome. With new legal protections and increasing societal acceptance, it even became practical for church leaders throughout the empire to gather in numbers to confer on pressing issues. Major developments were to come and Africa had important roles to play.

## AFRICA AND THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

In fact, Africa and Africans figured significantly in the church's recognition of the books of the New Testament canon. The canon is the collection of inspired writings<sup>13</sup> that are the authoritative scripture for the church. God gave the writings by inspiration during the days of the Apostles and, over time, led the church to acknowledge the books that have his authority. A bit of background is warranted before we elaborate on Africa's place in the process.

There were stages in the canonization process that roughly corresponded with the first four centuries of Christian history.<sup>14</sup> During the first century, all twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written and began circulating. There is, therefore, a sense in which the full canon existed in the first century as soon as the book of Revelation was completed.<sup>15</sup> After all, God had given the books by inspiration, and he knew that he intended them as Scripture for his people, though the church's formal recognition of the canon was to come much later. By early in the second century, the gospels and Paul's letters were widely used in worship for public reading, preaching, and teaching. At this point, there was already what we might call a functional canon, a recognized core, though there was uncertainty about some of the other books that would later be included.<sup>16</sup> Also in

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<sup>13</sup> It would be easy to confuse the word "canon" with "cannon." A cannon is, of course, an artillery gun. A canon is a collection of sacred writings.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* (Kregel: Grand Rapids, 2010), chapter 6.

<sup>15</sup> This statement assumes that Revelation was the final NT book to be written, although if another were the final book, its name could be substituted for Revelation in the sentence. Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2013, digital edition), chapter 1, "The Definition of Canon," refers to this as the "ontological canon," that is, the canon that existed as soon as the last New Testament book to be written was completed.

<sup>16</sup> Kruger, chapter 1.

the second century, new Christian writings were appearing; some of them falsely claiming apostolic authorship. In the third century, there was active and careful comparison of the books that we now have in our New Testament with these many other writings from various sources. The documents that falsely claimed apostolic authorship and deviated from the apostles' teachings were judged to be inauthentic. In the fourth century, the church was ready to recognize formally the books in our New Testament as the canon of inspired, authoritative Scripture. Church leaders were not, of course, conferring authority on the New Testament books. They were recognizing the authority that God had given to the books in uniquely inspiring them.

The canon would serve as a standard for measuring orthodoxy, that is, right and true doctrine. The church had not previously been without such a standard, in part because a functional canon had long been a reality. A couple of examples will show both that the church had already faced challenges to orthodoxy successfully and that formal recognition of a definite and complete canon of Scripture was needed for facing future challenges to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

A second century teacher named Marcion was attracted to the grace, love and kindness of the God who sent Jesus, but repulsed by the ideas of wrath and judgment. He viewed the God of the Jewish scriptures as a separate God from the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He rejected the God of the Old Testament. Marcion was also highly selective regarding the apostolic writings. He accepted only his own edited version of Luke's gospel and some of Paul's letters. He essentially fashioned a god of his own liking and assembled writings to fit his preferences. The church rejected Marcion's teachings. He would not, of course, be the last teacher in history to exalt a god of his own liking and invite others to serve his god with him.

Also in the second century, a man named Montanus founded what came to be called the New Prophecy. He and his followers believed that they were receiving new and fresh revelations directly from the Holy Spirit. They also believed that these revelations could be more authoritative than Jesus' own words or the words of Paul and the other apostles. Montanism was strongest in the North African city of Carthage.<sup>17</sup> The church also rejected Montanus' teachings.

The threat of Montanism was dealt with effectively in the second century, but there are aspects of it that sound a bit familiar and modern. "Prophets" in our day, even in Africa, may present their new revelations as authoritative, though their words would not stand up to testing by the words of Jesus and the

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<sup>17</sup> E.E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1954), 110 – 111.

apostles' teachings. Believers can be led into error by these teachings. In other words, challenges to orthodoxy continue to arise and need to be met successfully generation after generation. It seems clear that the church has an ongoing need for a definite and complete canon of Scripture as a trustworthy guide for faith and practice, and as a standard for defending against false teaching.

God used the African church in significant ways to meet this need. Athanasius served as bishop of the church in Alexandria for 45 years. An Alexandrian native, he was a brilliant and courageous defender of the faith. In AD 367, he wrote an Easter letter that circulated widely.<sup>18</sup> He included in it the list of twenty-seven books of the New Testament, though his order of the books was a bit different from the order with which we are familiar.<sup>19</sup> The important points for our story are that Athanasius was quite certain of the twenty-seven books that should be in the canon, that his views circulated widely with a warm reception, and that he was writing as an African from the African city of Alexandria.

Synods<sup>20</sup> that were significant in final recognition of the canon took place in the African cities of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397). Church leaders from throughout the evangelized world gathered for these meetings. African church leaders hosted the proceedings. African church members provided hospitality. These synods acknowledged the books of our New Testament and were decisive in the canonization process. So, the African church figured prominently in discerning those books that we now hold dear as the New Testament and confidently confess to be inspired by God, authoritative, and truth without mixture of error.<sup>21</sup>

## **AUGUSTINE'S CONVERSION AND MINISTRY**

We have mentioned Athanasius. He was one of many great African theologians and pastors during the early centuries. Another was Augustine who served as bishop of the city of Hippo. He was born in AD 354 to a Christian mother and a pagan father in the North African province of Numidia.

During his youth and young adulthood, Augustine experimented religiously outside of Christianity and lived for his own personal pleasure. His mother's prayers for him were not, however, to go unanswered. Eventually, he

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<sup>18</sup> The text of the letter is available at [www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Athanasius.html](http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Athanasius.html)

<sup>19</sup> Further, Athanasius' letter includes the book of Hebrews with Paul's letters. Paul may indeed have written the book of Hebrews. I do not presume to know better than Athanasius, but an author is not named in the text of Hebrews and is generally considered to be unknown in our day.

<sup>20</sup> Synod is another word for a council.

<sup>21</sup> The Baptist Faith and Message 2000, [www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp](http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp)



came under Christian influences that significantly affected him. One influence was the powerful preaching of Ambrose of Milan. The two of them became close personal friends. Another influence was the story of an Egyptian monk named Anthony. Augustine was increasingly attracted to godliness, but not wholeheartedly so. He prayed, “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.”<sup>22</sup> He remained, in fact, a slave to his own corruptions and in conflict inwardly, desiring to be done with his sins and yet powerless to let them go. As the time drew near for his deliverance from the kingdom of darkness, Augustine groaned under the weight of his struggle and called out for the help without which he sensed that he would never be free: “How long, how long? Tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour make an end to my uncleanness?”<sup>23</sup>

The Lord heard and answered. From a neighboring house Augustine heard the voice of a child “chanting over and over again, ‘Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it.’” He wondered what this could mean and then his mind fixed on the words as a command from God to pick up the Bible that lay nearby and read the first passage to which he would turn. He turned to Paul’s letter to the Romans and read these words: “... not in rioting and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom. 13:13-14). Immediately, he was certain that God had commanded him to put on Christ and had given him the grace necessary to do so.<sup>24</sup>

He was a changed man, cleansed of his sin and empowered to live for Christ. Eventually, Augustine became the bishop of the church in Hippo. He was a great preacher and theologian. His writings have profoundly influenced Christian thought through the centuries. One of his greatest works was *The City of God*. In it he responded to claims that the sack of Rome in AD 410 was the result of neglecting the old Roman gods during the Christian era. He also articulated the Christian hope in a truly eternal city not made by human hands.

This is a message that Christians in Africa and across the globe need in our day. We are loyal citizens contributing to the welfare of our earthly cities and states, but we are of a greater city, and shall finally dwell in it forever with our God and with the Lamb.

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<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 8, chapter 17.17.

<sup>23</sup> *Confessions*, Book 8, chapter 12.28.

<sup>24</sup> *Confessions*, Book 8, chapter 12.29.

## THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

By the time of Augustine, the early church already understood itself to be “catholic” in the basic sense of “universal.” Augustine said that the church is catholic “because it is scattered throughout the world,”<sup>25</sup> including in Africa, where Augustine himself lived and served as a pastor. The church was also catholic in the sense of generally consistent throughout the world in its leadership structure and in its commitment to the Scriptures.

When the church became specifically *Roman Catholic* is another question. That is, at what point did the church of Rome and, specifically, her bishop begin leading the churches scattered throughout the world? The question is highly pertinent to the story of the church in Africa, for she was largely Roman Catholic for quite some time. That is, African Christians looked to Rome and her bishop for leadership, as did Christians in other regions.

Progress in the direction of Roman leadership may have begun quite early. During New Testament times the church of Jerusalem had unique prominence, of course, though the church in Rome was already flourishing. The martyrdoms of both Peter and Paul, according to tradition, took place in Rome and would have almost certainly increased the profile of the church there. As a result of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, there was no longer a church of Jerusalem to which the churches of other cities could look for leadership. In addition to all this, the city of Rome was considered the leading city of the empire and churches throughout the world naturally tended to pay close attention to the Roman bishops’ statements in the early centuries.

Although we cannot fix an exact date on when the catholic church became the Roman Catholic Church, it seems that it had surely happened by the death of Leo I, the bishop of Rome, in AD 461. A capable theologian and leader, Leo reached a higher level of significance than had any previous Roman bishop. It seemed that the favor of God was on him in a remarkable way, especially at key moments of need. When Attila the Hun marched on Rome and it appeared certain that a devastating defeat was at hand for the city, Leo met the great warrior at the city gates and persuaded him to turn back with his powerful army. As we might suppose, this enhanced Leo’s reputation significantly. During the council at Chalcedon in AD 451, which articulated the doctrine that Christ is fully God and fully man in one person, the final formula was largely what Leo had proposed. When they heard the formula, participants in the council were said to have declared, “Peter has spoken through

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<sup>25</sup> Augustine wrote this in a letter to Severinus which is cited in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Catholicism* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1959), page 24.

Leo.”<sup>26</sup> Though the Roman Catholic Church teaches that Peter was the first pope, many historians have viewed Leo as the first of the Roman bishops who resembled what popes became in the following generations. During Leo’s day, the preeminence of the bishop of Rome was becoming reality and the catholic church was becoming increasingly *Roman* Catholic. As history progressed, authority would be centralized in the Roman bishop.<sup>27</sup> Priests, bishops, and Cardinals exercised oversight locally and regionally, but the popes pronounced official church teachings from Rome with Peter’s authority on matters such as the Saints, Mary, the sacraments, what is necessary to salvation, and so on. At times, the teachings would go beyond or seem inconsistent with the Scriptures.

The Roman Catholic Church also amassed immense wealth. There is an anecdote about this that, although historically fictitious, portrays a theological truth. It is said that Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth century theologian, went to visit the pope. The pope showed Thomas the church’s ornate buildings, works of art, and treasuries of gold and said, “Thomas, no longer can Peter say, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’” Aquinas answered, “Neither can he now say, ‘Rise up and walk.’”

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, dramatic changes would come from within the church itself. Before moving to this part of the story, however, we return to Africa to tell of an earlier challenge from outside that was to influence the religious map of the continent even to the present day.

## ISLAM’S ADVANCE IN NORTH AFRICA

At the turn of the seventh century, Northern Africa seemed to be a great stronghold of Roman Catholicism, but another sea change was on the horizon. Islam, the religion of Mohammad, began to advance on the continent. Muslim progress was rapid and pervasive. It came through conquest, as well as through business and trade. It continued over time with a systematic infusion of Islamic culture and order into African life and social structures. Incentives for indigenous populations to embrace Islam were strong. It was profitable in business and strategic politically to be Muslim.

The church in Northern Africa was devastated as a result. There is a sense in which Islam’s advance ended, or nearly ended, Christianity in Africa for centuries. This is not, however, the whole story. Islamic advance and cultural domi-

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<sup>26</sup> Pelikan, *Catholicism*, page 38.

<sup>27</sup> Pelikan, *Catholicism*, page 43

nance also highlighted the perseverance of a handful of Christian communities. For example, the Coptic Church in Egypt endured. It was seriously weakened. It did not grow. It seemed nearly paralyzed, but it endured. Similarly, the Ethiopian church survived. There may be various reasons why these communities endured, but one of them is surely that Christianity in its Ethiopian and Coptic expressions was quite contextualized and penetrated to the depths of community members' identities.

Today North Africa remains majority Muslim, some countries almost exclusively so. Some countries South of the Sahara are also majority Muslim.

Nigeria seems to portray the struggle for the continent in microcosm. Its population is nearly evenly distributed between Islam and Christianity. In Chapter Four, Dr. Ndzi will discuss challenges that Islam presents to African churches in our generation. For now, suffice it to say that in the seventh century and for the centuries that followed, Islam presented a major external challenge to the Roman Catholic Church.

Internal challenges were also coming. In the eleventh century, a schism divided the church into two branches, the Roman branch in the west and an eastern branch led initially from Constantinople.<sup>28</sup> As the centuries marched on, the Roman Church would show her deep need for reform, a need that would be met in due time. The drama of reform would play out mainly in Europe but would deeply influence the modern African Christianity that would later emerge.

## **MARTIN LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION**

In 1507, a German man named Martin Luther was ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood. In 1512, he joined the theological faculty of the University of Wittenburg. He was a professor and a preacher who studied the Bible carefully and had deep feelings about God's righteousness and his own unrighteousness.

He also had deep concerns about the Roman Catholic Church of his day, and he was not alone in these concerns. Problems had long been evident and Christians in various European countries were grieved by what they saw. Popes had displayed moral weakness and a thirst for worldly power. Priests had taken vows of celibacy and then been sexually immoral. Failures by clergy, especially high-ranking clergy, went unaddressed.

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<sup>28</sup> We now know Constantinople as the city of Istanbul in Turkey. Eastern Orthodox Christianity continues, most prominently in Eastern Europe, and is represented in Africa today.

Then there was the growing impression to which we alluded previously in the anecdote about Thomas Aquinas and the pope. The church's leaders seemed excessively focused on money. Church teachings sometimes had disturbing links with revenues for the institutional hierarchy's use. For example, the church taught that "indulgences" reduced the time that one would spend in purgatory—a place that, according to church teaching, imperfect Christians go after death to suffer for their sins until they are qualified for entry into heaven. Indulgences were papal pronouncements, often printed in a letter or ticket, of a reduction or waiver of time in purgatory. In Luther's day, indulgences could be purchased for oneself or for family members. Indulgence selling became a lucrative business.

It was an indulgence selling scheme that provoked Luther to take an action that we now view as having launched the sixteenth century Reformation. Pope Leo X entered office in 1513. He commissioned indulgence sales to finance a project to rebuild Saint Peter's Basilica into a great cathedral in Rome. The rebuilding effort took over one hundred years and huge sums of money to complete. Leo was one in a series of popes who prioritized financing it. Johann Tetzel was authorized by Leo to preach and sell indulgences in districts of Germany. Tetzel vividly described the horrors of purgatory, portraying his hearers' departed relatives as suffering miserably in flames. He then called on people to purchase the indulgences to put an end to their loved ones' torments. He reportedly made promises such as this: "The moment you hear your money drop in the box, the soul of your mother will jump out of purgatory."<sup>29</sup>

When Tetzel preached near Wittenburg, Luther felt compelled to object. On 31 October 1517, he posted Ninety-Five Theses or propositions disputing the power and effectiveness of indulgences. The tradition is that he posted the Theses on the door of the main church building in Wittenburg. The document quickly circulated through Germany and other countries. It resonated in Christian hearts and set the Reformation into motion.

As Luther continued to study his Bible, he preached and published writings on the New Testament doctrines that he discovered, many of which were at odds with official church tradition and teaching. As he studied the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, he came to the conviction that justification before God is by faith, not by the rituals and works of devotion that the Roman Catholic Church prescribed. This new biblical conviction freed Luther spiritually. He came to see righteousness as the gift of God to the people

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<sup>29</sup> B. K. Kuiper, *The Church in History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 211. (The sales pitch has also been memorialized as: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.")

whom God is saving. It also set Luther further at odds with the Roman Church. In January of 1521, Pope Leo announced Luther's excommunication.

Three months later, Luther stood before civil and church authorities in a hearing in the German city of Worms. Luther's writings were well known by this time. In fact, a stack of his books and pamphlets was on a table in front of him. The leaders of the hearing called on Luther to renounce and retract his views or be confirmed as a heretic for opposing Roman Catholic teachings. Luther felt the gravity of the moment. He was standing at a crossroads. He did not relish the final break from the Roman Church. It was the only church he had ever known and by which he had been ordained as a priest, but he was resolved and responded along these lines:

Since you require of me a simple, clear, and direct answer, I shall give it. Unless I am convinced from Holy Scripture and plain reason, I cannot and will not retract anything. My conscience is bound by the Word of God .... Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. So help me God. Amen.<sup>30</sup>

Luther was a courageous soul standing steadfastly upon the Word of God, fearing the Lord above all human authorities. The official pronouncement that came out of the meeting was an edict that declared Luther a heretic and an outlaw. His excommunication was confirmed.

It was not, however, a loss for Luther or for the causes of the Reformation. In one sense, he had stood alone at Worms. In another, he was not alone at all. A sympathetic German ruler protected him from further punishment by the Roman Church. Other preachers and theologians in Europe were also standing upon God's word. The Reformation faith quickly spread.

John Calvin, a Frenchman, preached and pastored in Geneva, Switzerland. He also published multiple editions of his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in which he set forth what he understood to be the faith of the Reformers. Lutherans trace their lineage to Martin Luther and Presbyterians to John Calvin, but many other groups recognize a spiritual indebtedness to these men as well. They are perhaps the most famous of all the Reformers.

There were many others also. Among them was Ulrich Zwingli of Switzerland. Zwingli discovered the truths of the gospel for himself in the Bible independently of Luther. He wrote, "I started preaching the gospel before I had

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<sup>30</sup> This is my selective summary of Luther's concluding words. A translation of the full speech is accessible at [www.sjsu.edu/people/james.lindahl/courses/Hum1B/s3/Luther-Speech-Worms-1521.pdf](http://www.sjsu.edu/people/james.lindahl/courses/Hum1B/s3/Luther-Speech-Worms-1521.pdf)

even heard Luther's name.... I followed holy Scripture alone." Zwingli broke from the common practice of preaching based on prescribed texts from the church calendar and began preaching passage by passage through books of the Bible. Using this approach, he eventually preached through the entire New Testament. In 1523 in his *Sixty-Seven Theses*, Zwingli declared his break with such Roman Catholic beliefs and practices as required fasting, celibacy for the clergy, purgatory, and the use of statues in the church.<sup>31</sup>

Some went even further in reform. The Anabaptists, for example, insisted on believer's baptism, rejecting baptism of infants. "Anabaptist" means one who baptizes again. They were part of what became known as the Radical Reformation.

Anabaptists and Baptists are not identical, but they are similar in some ways, one of which is the emphasis on believer's baptism. A Baptist church began in Amsterdam in 1609. A few years later one started in England. In 1638, a Baptist congregation began in America. Baptists have placed a high value on preaching and have produced some of the greatest preachers of recent centuries. Charles H. Spurgeon was a 19th century Baptist pastor who was an heir of Reformation theology. He was an eloquent orator who preached Christ from the Scriptures to great crowds in the London Metropolitan Tabernacle. His Bible knowledge was vast, his sanctified imagination vivid, and his eloquence rare. Beyond the natural and cultivated capacities that he possessed, he felt deeply his need for and depended deeply on the Holy Spirit. As he ascended to the pulpit to preach time after time, he reportedly said to himself quietly, "I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit." This was no mere ritual for Spurgeon. It was his honest reminder to himself and confident confession that true preaching is far more than man's effort. It is not by the might nor the power of a man but by the Spirit of the Lord.

We can say something similar about the Reformation of the 16th century. It was not by human might nor power but by the Spirit of the Lord. Many Roman Catholics will, naturally, differ with this. Although Catholics and Protestants have engaged in respectful dialogue in recent decades, Catholics have generally seen Protestants as prodigal children who need to repent and return to the fold so that unity can prevail. Protestants, on the other hand, cannot contemplate unity around a centralized authority that appears to value human traditions above Scripture.

For Evangelicals, the doctrine of salvation is perhaps the greatest issue on which there can be no compromise with Roman Catholicism. The Reformation principles essential to this doctrine have been summed up by histo-

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<sup>31</sup> Steven Lawson, [www.ligonier.org/blog/zurich-revolutionary-ulrich-zwingli/](http://www.ligonier.org/blog/zurich-revolutionary-ulrich-zwingli/)

rians in what are known as “The Five Solae:”<sup>32</sup> *Sola Gratia* (by grace alone), *Sola Fide* (through faith alone), *Solus Christus* (in Christ alone), *Soli Deo Gloria* (to the glory of God alone), and *Sola Scriptura* (based on Scripture alone).

So, how is the church now catholic, in that basic sense of universal, given the different branches and many denominations that we have today? In Africa alone, there are many different denominations, as well as independent churches and church networks. Respective groups have distinctive theological positions on various issues. In what sense is the church unified? The church’s catholicity and unity transcend denominational organizations and questions of church polity. The church is unified in Christ himself, in the gospel itself. The universal church includes all the redeemed whom Christ has purchased by his blood and who have been justified by faith. In our day, thanks be to God, there are many who fit this description in Africa.

## THE CHURCH’S EXPANSION IN AFRICA

More than 600 million Africans now profess Christ as Savior and gather for worship in churches large and small on the continent. Occasionally, someone will respond to this statistic by asking, “But how many of these people are genuine Christians?” It’s a valid question and, of course, only God could answer it accurately. A couple of observations can, however, be made. On the one hand, we can reasonably assume that not all 600 million have a saving knowledge of and relationship with Christ. Nominalism, unsound doctrine, syncretism, and non-enduring faith are real issues. On the other hand, we can also assume that a significant percentage of the 600 million truly are Christians, perhaps a percentage similar to the percentages in other places where Christianity is prominent. The number of professing Christians does seem to be a significant indicator of remarkable progress of the gospel in Africa.

This brings us to another question that we will spend the remainder of this chapter considering: how could such progress have been made? We have acknowledged that the 7th century advance of Islam was devastating to the African church of that period. Indeed, it initiated what has been called a millennium of darkness on the continent, sometimes dated from 640 – 1652.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sola means “alone” in Latin, the language of theology in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in western Europe.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1979), 61. In 1652 the Dutch East India Company established a settlement at the Cape of Good Hope. This is now Cape Town, South Africa. With the arrival of the Dutch came protestant Christians, ministers, and churches.



North African churches disappeared. Christian witness was nearly silenced. In fact, Islam remains dominant in Northern Africa in our day. During the millennium of darkness, Christianity had no real foothold south of the Sahara, but the growth in the number of Christians and churches has been remarkable over the last few centuries and phenomenal in the last 120 years. How did this movement take place? What are the reasons for it?

### **The Work of Missionaries**

One major reason has been the work of missionaries who came to Africa during the last few centuries and preached the gospel. At first there were a few pioneers. Eventually, there were thousands. Most came with a profound sense of calling. This was important to their perseverance, for the cost for many of the early missionaries and their families was high. Africa was quite different in environment from the missionaries' homelands. Their bodies were not prepared for the diseases they faced. Many died within a few years or even mere months after arrival. Africa was known as "the white man's graveyard."<sup>34</sup> Yet, the missionaries kept coming.

Some of them did thrive in Africa over many years. Robert and Mary Moffat were among these. The London Missionary Society sent Robert to South Africa in 1816. Mary later joined him, and they were married in 1819 in Cape Town. The two of them served in Southern Africa until 1870. They went northward from the Cape region to serve among the Tswana and settled at Kuruman. After a decade of faithful preaching and relationship building, conversions and baptisms took place. A church grew to two hundred believers.

Moffatt was a man of vision, as was his more famous son-in-law, David Livingstone. Moffatt had written, "In the vast plain to the north I have sometimes seen, in the morning sun, the smoke of a thousand villages where no missionary has ever been."<sup>35</sup> The vision was more spiritual and figurative than literal. The plain immediately to the North of Kuruman was not highly populated, but a vast continent with countless villages did spread out to the North. The picture of "the smoke of a thousand villages" deeply moved Livingstone. He determined that he would go where no other missionary had gone and call others to come also and give themselves to the work. He is best known for exploring Sub-Saharan Africa in a search for favorable trade routes and for proclaiming Christ as he went. He was convinced that Christianity and commerce were

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<sup>34</sup> Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2004, digital edition), chapter 6.

<sup>35</sup> Tucker, chapter 6.

the keys to African progress and ending the slave trade in Africa.<sup>36</sup> His published accounts of his expeditions stirred missionary concern and commitment in many hearts.

In 1873 during an expedition into the interior of Africa, one of Livingston's attendants found him dead in his tent still kneeling beside his bed with his face in his hands. It was the position in which he had so often prayed for the salvation of the African peoples. His attendants honored him by burying his heart under a Mupundu tree and drying his body under the African sun until it was mummified. They then carried the body 2000 kilometers to the coast so that his countrymen could return it to Britain for burial.

Of course, the legacy of Livingston and those who followed him is complex and, at points, problematic. Livingston believed that colonization would be good for Africans. It did bring progress in many ways. It also brought cultural disruption and conflict.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, missions and missionaries have mishandled transitions at key points. At times, they have been too slow to pass the baton of responsibility and authority to African believers. At other times they have passed off schools and other ministries abruptly and carelessly. Sometimes, they have done both—resisted passing the baton and then abruptly insisted on doing so hastily. All missionaries have had flaws (some of the flaws inexcusable) but, on the whole, God has accomplished much good in calling and bringing missionaries to Africa to proclaim Christ.

News of Livingston's death inspired many in the English-speaking world to volunteer for missionary service. One of these was Mary Slessor who would serve in Africa for nearly forty years, chiefly in Calabar, Nigeria. She lived according to the traditional village ways and built warm relationships with African people, though tension arose at times over traditional customs. In that region, the birth of twins was taken as the sign of a curse. It was the custom for the babies to be killed and the mother exiled from the tribe. Slessor perplexed traditionalists by rescuing twins from would be killers and sheltering the babies' mothers. Though she saw few baptisms and little progress in church planting, she rejoiced in helping to organize a church with seven members in 1903. She considered her work to be preparatory, believing that others would follow her. They would sow where she had plowed. This was the role

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<sup>36</sup> By the time of Livingston's days in Africa, Britain and America had outlawed the transatlantic slave trade and Britain had abolished slavery in the empire. Nonetheless, the trade remained legal in some countries. Arab slave traders were common, and various African tribes continued ancient practices of slavery.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Penguin Books: New York, 1959), a novel that portrays the complex experience of African villagers with British missionaries and the British colonization of Nigeria at the beginning of the 20th century.

of many of the early missionaries. They were preparing for others who would come after them, some of whom would be workers in a great harvest.

Moffat, Livingston, and Slessor were all Protestants. They were, in some basic ways, heirs of the Evangelical faith of the Reformers. Roman Catholics have also been active in mission during recent centuries, but two thirds of the professing Christians in Africa today are non-Catholic. They are associated with Protestant traditions and independent African churches. Suffice it to say that Protestant and broadly Evangelical missionaries have profoundly influenced the character of contemporary African Christianity.

Missionaries continue to serve in Africa today, but most are in quite different roles from those of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century missionaries. They are now in mutually agreed upon partnerships with African leaders, helping facilitate progress as the African harvest force leads and advances in the work.

### **The Work of African Believers**

This leads us to another reason for the remarkable growth of the church on this great continent: Africans embraced the gospel message and proclaimed Christ within their own families and tribes and beyond. In 1900, about 3% of the African population was Christian; in 2020, about 49% was Christian. During the same period, the population of Africa increased from 111 million to 1.3 billion. Both the population and the percentage of Christians rose dramatically. Such growth in Christianity could only have happened by Africans themselves zealously sharing with others the wonderful salvation that they had experienced in Christ. This is exactly what has occurred. God has used ordinary believers to reach others for Christ. He has also raised up gifted and faithful preachers and pastors who have preached the word faithfully and fervently in season and out of season.

William Duma was one of these preachers and pastors. He served the Umgeni Road Baptist Church in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa until his death in 1977. He was born a Zulu and was influenced toward Christ in childhood by his mother and an uncle. A missionary mentored him in studying and teaching the Bible when he was a young man. God's hand was mightily upon him. Duma preached biblical messages that met people where they were and directed them faithfully to the Lord Jesus. He was powerful in prayer and walked in fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Although in high demand as a preacher and known as a man whose prayers God answered miraculously, Pastor Duma was a humble servant of the Lord. He lived modestly and did

not amass wealth for himself. He believed that spiritual gifts were for God's glory, not for enriching oneself materially.<sup>38</sup>

Duma was one of countless Sub-Saharan Africans whom the Lord called into the harvest, and the progress continues. In our day, African pastors and leaders oversee the churches and organizational structures within all traditions and denominations.

### **The Work of the Holy Spirit**

A third reason for the growth of African churches is that God has poured out his Spirit on his people. African churches and believers have experienced the work of the Spirit that the New Testament promises and describes: "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'"; "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses ..."; "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh ... even on my male servants and female servants"; "The Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" The Holy Spirit has brought new life in Christ, empowered believers, and used many as witnesses for Christ. It is manifestly evident that African churches are dwelling places for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:22).

Many Africans live with deep awareness of spiritual forces and feel the need for God's intervention and help in their daily lives. God has chosen to show his power in giving the help that his people need. There are many sincere and credible testimonies of miraculous answers to prayer and deliverances from demonic oppression.

Much good has come from emphasis on the Holy Spirit's power and work in African churches, and Church life in many Sub-Saharan African congregations today has at least a degree of Pentecostal or charismatic flavor. During the 20th century, Pentecostalism spread rapidly around the globe and Pentecostal forms of Christianity are the fastest growing in our generation. There are also pitfalls to avoid and challenges to face related to Pentecostalism and some of the teachings, such as the Prosperity Gospel, that tend to accompany it. We will discuss some of these challenges in the next chapter. We want to face them well so that biblically faithful, Spirit-empowered African churches will accomplish the purposes that God intends.

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Garnett, *Take Your Glory, Lord: William Duma: His Life Story* (Roodepoort: Baptist Publishing House, 1980).

## The Purposes of God for African Churches Today

Finally, has not God given such dramatic growth to his church in Africa because he intends for African churches to provide important and increasing leadership for the church worldwide? In some parts of the world where the church has previously seemed strong, there are signs of weakness. A great need now exists for leadership both theologically and in Great Commission fulfillment. The African church is poised to play a key role in meeting it.

There is a need for African churches to lead theologically with firm commitment to the authority and teachings of the Bible. In the 2019 General Conference of the United Methodist Church, representatives from Methodist churches in Africa were key to a vote in favor of biblical doctrine and sound policies regarding sexual ethics, especially in relation to marriage and ordination. Dr. Jerry Kulah of Liberia gave a speech in which he clarified his and other Africans' commitment to Scripture and unwillingness to compromise on its teachings. He concluded with:

We are grounded in God's word and the gracious and clear teachings of our church. On that we will not yield! We will not take a road that leads us away from the truth! We will take the road that leads to the making of disciples of Jesus Christ for transformation of the world!<sup>39</sup>

These were timely words well spoken. If the church is to be "the Pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), it needs the convictional and capable leadership of African pastors and theologians who reason soundly based on Scriptural authority.

There is also a need and opportunity for African churches to lead in Great Commission fulfillment. The Great Commission has always been for African churches as fully as it has been for churches that gather on other continents. It is certainly for African churches in this and coming generations. Many of our Lord's choicest servants are in Africa. They are adaptable, culturally sensitive, resourceful, and receptive to the Spirit. How many will go to the ends of the earth to reach the remaining unreached peoples and nations of Africa and across the globe? Surely the Holy Spirit is now speaking and will continue to speak to African churches regarding sending African missionaries to the ends of the earth.

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<sup>39</sup> [www.goodnewsmag.org/2019/02/kulah-standing-on-the-promises-of-god/](http://www.goodnewsmag.org/2019/02/kulah-standing-on-the-promises-of-god/)

## CONCLUSION

The Lord has been at work in Africa to save souls and build up his church for a very long time. In fact, during recent centuries and especially during the last one hundred years or so, the progress of the gospel and the growth of the church in Africa have been amazing. The harvest has been abundant, and we are now in a season of great opportunity.

We are also in a season of great challenges. In the next chapter, Dr. Ndzi will guide us to consider some of the contextual challenges that confront African churches.



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## CHAPTER 4

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### CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

- Jones Ndzi -

This chapter will attempt to look at challenges that the church is currently facing on the African continent. In the next chapter we will suggest some ways the church can tackle these challenges.

#### MULTIETHNICITY

According to the Joshua Project, the continent of Africa is home to 3,715 people groups. This means that cross cultural interactions are very much a part of the experience for most people in Africa. It is very difficult to travel a hundred kilometers in any direction from almost any given spot on the African continent without crossing ethnic boundaries and, in some cases, multiple ethnic boundaries. So, the biblical notion of “tribes and tongues and people and language” (Rev. 5:9) is very much a part of the African experience, though obviously not in the Christ-exalting sense that the book of Revelation speaks about.

The multicultural outlook of Africa means that many African towns and cities tend to draw people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. Such cities can be, at least potentially, highly strategic for reaching many different people groups with the gospel (see Acts 2:9-13). Furthermore, efforts to plant and lead gospel-centered churches in such places will help to accentuate the wonderful truth that ethnic background, social class, gender, and age distinctions are inconsequential in determining who becomes part of the covenant God.

Alas, it is the case that in a world that is in bondage to corruption (Rom. 8:21), almost every opportunity is beset by a plight. The multiethnic character of Africa has birthed its share of ethnic tensions and strife. It is probably impossible to compile an exhaustive list of such tragedies. Much of African



history, before the advent of colonialism, is rife with stories of more powerful tribes conquering and ruling over weaker ones in domineering and humiliating ways. There isn't much of this type of outright fighting today and that is a wonderful blessing to celebrate. But it would be extremely naïve to assume that the absence of inter-tribal wars reflects an absence of ethnocentrism.

I grew up in the northwest region of Cameroon and it never fails to amaze me that almost every tribe I have ever known has a derogatory label in their tribal language by which they refer to people of other tribes. In fact, sometimes in the same tribe, people of various villages have insults they hurl at those from other villages. So, there are many Shibboleths (Judg. 12:6) that help to show who is “in” and who is “out.” These ethnocentric particulars often feed tribal tensions, discrimination, and hatred.

Tragically enough, the church has not been unaffected. Church and denominational splits often follow tribal lines. Chances of rising to leadership in the church, or in a denomination in many cases, hinge on the prospective leader's ethnic origin. A sister once told me a disheartening story in this regard. Her tribe received the gospel through the missionary efforts of brothers and sisters from another tribe. Over time, as gospel work grew and matured in her tribe, Spirit-gifted leaders emerged. But believers from the tribe that brought them the gospel will often say to people from her tribe, “We brought you the gospel, not leadership.” How lamentable!

Corrective church discipline is another prey in this regard. It is often hindered in many cases because church members, depending on their level of maturity, can feel the false and fleshly guilt of betraying a fellow tribesperson by voting for them to be excommunicated for unrepentant sin. Such false guilt is further reinforced by the Shame/Honor dynamic where someone could begin to feel that they took a step that brought shame on a fellow tribe member and, by extension, on the tribe. This list of difficulties can go on and on. But those highlighted here hopefully make the point that the multicultural character of Africa engenders factors that contribute to shaping the way local churches are established and function. The church must therefore strive to live out with zeal and intentionality the gospel reality that in Christ, “there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11).

## SHAME AND HONOR DYNAMICS<sup>1</sup>

African cultures are largely marked by an eagerness to preserve personal, family, and societal honor. Disrepute is hard to put off. This is revealed by what people in my part of Africa inquire about when a potential marriage relationship is forming. People will often ask to know if anyone in the recent ancestry of the potential suitor ever died by suicide, was known to practice witchcraft, or was a thief. This line of questioning could, in and of itself, be innocuous; people are just seeking to help keep a son or daughter from entering into a difficult marriage which could have been prevented. But there is more. The questions asked are also often motivated by a complex interplay of several factors, not least of which is a deep-seated commitment to the reputation of the family. It is believed that associating with someone whose family is known to bear a shameful reputation is to share in their shame. Conversely to associate with someone from a family that bears a noble reputation is to share in their honor. This is obviously not unique to Africa. Nonetheless, it is a particularly important aspect of societal life in Africa. The realities of shame and honor play significant, and sometimes determinative, roles in the choices that people make in almost all spheres of life.

It is remarkable that shame and honor are very important concepts in the Bible. Shame and honor are a significant aspect of Paul's instruction in how the Corinthians were to relate properly to God-ordained authority and show gender distinctions (1 Cor. 11:2-16). In fact, from the very beginning "the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:25). But this blessed new beginning changed dramatically after man sinned. The man confessed, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself" (Gen. 3:10). This sense of fear due to man's realization of his nakedness presumes shame.

Sin, guilt, and shame are repeatedly correlated in the Old Testament (Ezr. 9:7; Neh. 1:3; Job 8:22; Ps. 78:66; 97:7). So, shame in the Bible means more than just a sense of embarrassment for a foolish word or act. It relates to our standing before the Lord. That is why we are told that trust in the Lord protects the faithful from shame (Ps. 22:5; 25:2, 20; 119:6; 127:5; 129:5; Prov. 13:5; Isa. 22:18; 42:17; 44:11; 45:16; et al). In the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes, the shame that entered the world because of man's rebellion came to rest with all its magnitude on the Lord Jesus Christ. He "endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a tremendous influence exerted on the culture and the church by a fear and power dynamic. This power could be political, socio-cultural, or spiritual.

God” (Heb 12:2). So “whoever believes in him will not be put to shame” (Rom. 9:33). In other words, when God settles accounts on the last day “There will be . . . glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good” (Rom. 2:9–10.” But those who refuse to believe and abide in him will “shrink from him in shame at his coming” (1 John 2:28).

My point is that the shame and honor dynamic in Africa affords the church a great open door for witnessing and modelling what kind of honor people should pursue (John 12:43) and what kind of shame people should avoid at all costs (Rom. 9:33-10:13). Our problem as the peoples of Africa and, indeed, as human beings, is not that we feel shame, it is rather that we feel shame for the wrong things. Ours is a misplaced shame. Similarly, it is noble for us as human beings to seek honor (Rom. 2:7). At creation, God conferred a unique honor on humans (Ps. 8:5). The tragedy lies in the fact that we seek honor in the wrong things. And this is every human being’s problem. The church on the African continent bears the awesome responsibility of proclaiming the truth that it is the cross of Jesus Christ that defines what we should be ashamed of and what we should seek honor in.

## **THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

The peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa, at least generally, have a keen sense of spiritual reality. Among the various expressions of this spiritual consciousness are systems and movements like African Traditional Religion, the Prosperity Gospel, Roman Catholicism, and Islam.

### **African Traditional Religion**

The various religious beliefs and practices common to the peoples of Africa are often referred to as African Traditional Religions (ATRs).<sup>2</sup> A little anecdote of my growing up experience will, hopefully, help to paint a picture of some central

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<sup>2</sup> I am using African Traditional Religions (ATRs) as an umbrella designation for the various ways in which the peoples of Africa seek to relate with and make sense of spiritual realities. ATRs is a disputed label among scholars. For a survey of the major views on the subject see lecture 4 of Tite Tienou’s excellent course on African Theology and Religions here <https://odbu.org/courses/wm508/>. Dr. Tienou’s whole course is an in-depth, scholarly, and profoundly insightful treatment of African Theology and Religions. I enthusiastically recommend it to anyone interested in the subject.

tenets of ATRs.<sup>3</sup> As indicated above, I grew up in the northwest region of Cameroon. Throughout almost every village of our tribe was a distribution (in no readily discernible pattern) of what we might call “sacred spaces” or “sanctuaries.” These were places earmarked and set apart for the cultic life of the people in the villages. Such sanctuaries varied in grandeur and cultic significance. Some were as simple as a uniquely shaped stone carefully placed with specific low growing plants around it. These were usually the “sacred space” of an extended family. Then there were more elaborate and more intentionally built houses that represented the center of the religious life of a whole village. Such houses usually had a custodian or “priest.” The ornamentation in and around such houses was unique. It unmistakably signaled to anyone raised in that village that the place was sacred. The activities in and around such houses, often on a designated day of the week when there is mandatory cessation from work, included, but were not limited to, the pouring of libations. In general, women were almost always excluded from these sacred places. Women could come to bring in the first fruits of the harvest of maize, the main food crop of our tribe, for blessing. But even such “offerings” were required to be left at the door of this sanctuary and not taken inside by the women. Each family and/or tribe used oral tradition to pass on stories that convey the significance and necessity of these sanctuaries. People were usually warned that those trifling with this matter would face horrific repercussions. Tragedies such as bearing children with defects, suffering miscarriages, having stillbirths, becoming barren, having no returns on investments, suffering poor yields from the farms, seeing sudden deaths of children, epileptic seizures, etc., ranked among the most fearful consequences.

This rather brief sketch of a first-hand experience reveals several tenets of ATRs broadly defined. One such tenet is a recognition, almost beyond dispute, of a spirit world whose existence directly affects the lives of people for better or for worse. Furthermore, it is believed that human beings can and should strive to relate with the spirit world to make sure its effect is positive, not negative. Additionally, ATRs are generally not based on sacred writings that tell people who or what this spirit world is like. There is also usually no formalized instruction on right and wrong ways to relate to this spirit world. Instead, there are human ‘mediators’ between the spirit world and the general populace. These intermediaries know what people ought to

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<sup>3</sup> I am keenly aware that my experience doesn’t tell every African’s story. How could it? But I am interested in showing how my experience reflects what has been observed to be typical of ATRs by other writers of African descent. See for example Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1991).

do in their attempts to relate to spiritual realities. As such, these mediators are to be trusted and their instructions followed.<sup>4</sup> Finally, fear of misfortune is a dominant, if not the main, driver of compliance.

#### *ATR's Effect on the Church and Her Mission*

It has already been noted that a basic worldview assumption in almost every culture in Africa is belief in powerful spiritual realities that affect humans. This situation both opens a door for and presents a challenge to the Christian message. It opens a door because the Christian minister in Africa is not generally facing a secular mindset that is suspicious or rejecting of supernatural reality. The biblical assertion that there is a God and this "God is spirit" (John 4:24) is not bizarre to most people. The existence of spiritual beings such as angels and demons is taken for granted by most people. People are generally very open to the biblical claims that God is powerful and does wondrous things. So, while people's conceptions about God are often different from what the Bible teaches, the general belief in God will be a promising starting point for a gospel or evangelistic conversation (cf. Acts 14:16-17; 17:22-28).

But, as we would expect, ATRs pose significant challenges to the Christian message, especially regarding discipleship. One challenge is ATRs' enormous potential to undermine God's command for exclusive allegiance to him (Exod. 20:1-6; 1 Cor. 8:6). While the Christian message may seem to find a ready welcome in Africa, just what many church members believe about God and his ways is often unclear. The lack of clarity on the nature of the God of the Bible is often accompanied by a failure to take seriously God's exclusive claim to worship. These two deficiencies produce, in many cases, church members who try to swear allegiance to both God and ancestral spirits. Such professing Christians may be very present in the life of the church and, in some cases, even be in the leadership of the church. It is beyond dispute that a church is, at best, spiritually weak if some of her members profess faith in Christ while at the same time seeking help from mediums and sorcerers to protect against witchcraft (cf. Gal. 5:20; Rev. 9:21; 18:23).

Where I grew up it was very common to hear people, especially the older generation of church-attending men, argue that "heaven helps those who help themselves." By this, they meant that it is irresponsible to simply trust God for

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<sup>4</sup> This is an area in which the fear and power dynamic alluded to in note one above is on full display. The assumption is that the priests relate with the world of the spirits and so have spiritual power. This means that all other people have to comply with the injunctions of these priests. Those who act in defiance could have terrible things happen to them as a result. So, there is a sense in which fear is the lifeblood of ATRs.

one's security. Part of being a man meant a call to try as much as possible to protect oneself and family against the dreaded and ever-looming threat of malevolent spirits. This was done by appeasing and/or warding off such spirits through various rituals. So, a very significant part of Christian discipleship in Africa has to include a call to "flee from idolatry" (1 Cor. 10:14).

It is extremely needful for believers in Jesus to learn that no one can "drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons;" or "partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Cor. 10:21). Therefore, everyone who names the name of the Lord must "keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). The living God is not one more addition to the various other gods. So, many church members on the continent of Africa need to answer Elijah's question with urgency: "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kgs 18:21).<sup>5</sup>

Another challenge confronting the church that stems from ATRs is an exacting demand for performance. In most traditional religions of Africa, people do things to earn the good will of the gods or the spirits that are believed in and worshipped. People have to offer sacrifices, pour libations, chant incantations and other such things to find favor with the world of the spirits. So, the gospel's promise that "to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5) often sounds too good to be true. Acts of obedience like baptism, church attendance, giving, and participation in the Lord's Supper can easily be construed as things done to earn God's favor. This also means that people can tend to have little to no assurance of salvation which leads to little victory in fighting sin. Again, the proclivity towards a works-based righteousness is not an African phenomenon. It is a human predicament (Luke 18:9-14). But ATRs certainly aid and abet that sinful inclination.

Also, in some cultures, stories of the reappearances of deceased relatives are commonplace. Such stories befog and diminish the beauty of the gospel hope of the bodily resurrection of believers at Christ's second coming. Further, such claims undermine the trustworthiness of the Bible's teaching on the reality of death, heaven, and hell. Closely associated with the issue of the reappearances of the deceased is the notion of the "village of the dead." As a little boy I often heard stories of certain villages where dead people go and live. It will be claimed that right around the time when someone's soul is de-

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<sup>5</sup> This is not an argument for Africans to cease being African, absolutely not. It is an argument for us African church members to subordinate our Africanness to the more crucial reality that for those believe in Jesus, "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Phil. 3:20).

parting, if you stand at a particular spot, you will see the dying person on his or her way to this “village of the dead.”

Even when people abandon such notions as untenable, death remains a terrorizing and difficult reality to understand. Where do people go when they die? Could it be that there are indeed villages of the dead somewhere? If so, where are they and what do they look like? If not, what are we to make of the stories that have been told us? So, the call to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2) on these matters, in my estimation, continues to be an urgent aspect of discipleship.

Another area that is worthy of note here is the dynamic of male-female relationships in the home and in the church. The majority of African peoples believe in and practice male leadership. There is something to celebrate about that.<sup>6</sup> However, because most traditional religions assume the inferiority of the woman, the biblical concept of equality between the sexes is offensive to many men. Man’s fallen nature shares the presuppositions of ATR which exacerbates the scarcity of servant-hearted male leadership. Most ATRs reject any notion that women are to be honored and treated with dignity as fellow heirs of God’s gracious gift of life (1 Pet. 3:7). So, ATRs present a significant challenge to the biblical view of masculinity that understands, embraces, and celebrates equality between the sexes without blurring the distinction in roles and function in the home and the church. As with all problems, the solution to this lies in following Paul’s example to “not shrink from declaring ... the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

## **The Prosperity Gospel**

The phrase “prosperity gospel” describes a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices. In published works, this movement is often referred to as “the Health & Wealth Gospel,” “the Word of Faith Movement,” “Positive Confession” teaching, “Name It and Claim It’ Theology,” and other similar tags. The baseline of the movement is a tendency to talk about the cross of Jesus as a steppingstone to emphasizing that God wants to give believers much wealth and health in this life. In other words, the prosperity gospel teaches that health

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<sup>6</sup> In our day and age, authority—perhaps male leadership in particular—is viewed not as one of God’s good gifts to humans but as an evil that should be rejected. But Bible-believing Christians know better. We cannot come up with a better way of ordering society than God has prescribed. God would have all peoples of all times and places “understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3). No society or generation of humans will ever become too sophisticated for this truth. The only way to ensure human flourishing is to abide by the truth that God created man as male and female, and the male is called to lead (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:18-25; Matt. 19:1-12; 1 Tim. 2:11-13).

and wealth are the heritage of believers in this life, and it is up to each believer to decide whether or not to appropriate these.

*The Outlook of Prosperity Theology in Africa*

The “prosperity gospel movement” in Africa is extremely diverse and variegated. On one end of the spectrum, there are people who are self-consciously opposed to the ideology because they believe it is false and dangerous, but because they are not adequately trained in the Scripture, they still inadvertently teach it (cf. Acts 18:25). On the opposite end are people who, by any sound biblical assessment, mislead and deceive their followers. Such deceivers take advantage of the fact that many people in Africa are spiritually minded. This means that most Africans are open to listening when someone claiming to be a “man of God” says he has a “revelation” from God about them.

Capitalizing upon experiences that people generally have, these teachers propagate some of the most bizarre notions. For example, it will be claimed that if you see yourself having sexual relations in dreams, then you have a spiritual husband or wife.<sup>7</sup> Or if you have dreams in which you are eating food, especially meat, then there is some serious demonic activity targeted at you and you need deliverance. There is clearly no basis in God’s all-sufficient Word for these strange claims. But these claims make “special deliverance prayers” an urgent need for any untaught person who has had such experiences.

It is not surprising, then, that such peddlers of God’s Word often plan their gatherings around “prophetic utterances” and “special breakthrough prayers.” The creativity (and brazenness) with which they advertise what they do is astounding (cf. 2 Pet. 2:1-3, 10-22). The advent of social media has exponentially increased the dissemination of such invitations and purported “testimonies” of “breakthroughs.” All in all, we could say that there are unintentional proponents of the ideology on one end of the spectrum, self-conscious deceivers on the other extreme, and various combinations of these two in between.

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<sup>7</sup> See a vigorous and edifying critique of the notion of spirit husband/wife from Dr. Conrad Mbewe here <http://www.conradmbewe.com/2013/03/the-nonsense-of-spiritual-husbands-and.html>. See here <https://www.destinymoulders.com/understanding-the-issue-or-mystery-of-spirit-husband-or-wife/> for a failed attempt to respond to Dr. Mbewe. The response utterly flops because it makes absolutely no appeal to the Holy Scriptures. It only points to several “testimonies” from individuals who claim to have experienced the phenomenon and concludes that anyone who watches “will be left without any iota of doubt as to the existence or otherwise of spirit husband/wife.” This is a classic stratagem of the health-wealth movement: make the so-called “testimonies” of adherents the basis of faith for everyone else. But those who know their God know that the only thing that is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16) is that which is breathed out by God, namely, “All scripture.”



Formulating neat categories of self-conscious prosperity preachers is also notoriously difficult to do. This is primarily due to the wide variety of practices among them. However, one of the most common traits seems to be the popularity of titles like “apostle” and “prophet.” These titles conjure up specific expectations in people’s minds. Such include prophecies, healings, breakthrough prayers, and dramatic manifestations of demoniacs among others. As used among many health-wealth preachers, the titles “apostle” and “prophet” communicate vividly to the general populace in Africa. But what most people have come to expect from those bearing these titles today has almost nothing to do with what the Bible teaches about the titles.

For our purposes here, we will attempt to classify self-conscious prosperity preachers into two main groups. The criterion for this is the general availability or unavailability of Bible teaching in their meetings. One group comprises those who regularly read from the Bible during their meetings and claim to get their teaching and doctrine from the Bible. Claims of revelations from the Lord may still be a regular feature of their services. Also, among such teachers, there is often a blatant absence of explicit effort to ascribe incontestable authority to the Bible. These would be represented by the likes of Chris Oyakhilome,<sup>8</sup> David Oyedepo<sup>9</sup> and others. Some of these have authored many books published by publishing houses run by or associated with the churches or ministries they founded.

A second group is made up of individuals who infrequently read the Bible in their meetings. The steady diet available for their followers is utterances communicated as revelations or prophetic insights from the Lord. Their followers and listeners are expected to believe these pronouncements as uttered. People lined up or called up for a “miracle prayer” is a common feature of their meetings and church services. Representatives of this group include TB Joshua<sup>10</sup> and Shepherd Bushiri. Bushiri, for example, “describes [his] non-denominational church as a prophetic ministry based on the principle that God cares for and loves people and *wants to speak directly to them*.”<sup>11</sup> The names mentioned here can easily be found through a simple Google search on the internet, but the phenomenon of health and wealth theology is championed by countless others in Africa with varying levels of popularity.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris\\_Oyakhilome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Oyakhilome)

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Oyedepo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Oyedepo)

<sup>10</sup> TB Joshua passed away on Saturday June 5, 2021. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/6/popular-but-controversial-nigerian-pastor-tb-joshua-dies-aged-57>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57388592>

<sup>11</sup> <https://ecgministry.org/prophet-shepherd-bushiri/>. Italics mine.

*Some Reasons for the Attractiveness of the Prosperity Gospel*

It is needful for me to clarify an important point at this juncture. And it is this. In this discussion on the prosperity gospel, I have absolutely no desire to slander or smear anyone. I have memories of myself ignorantly promoting the prosperity gospel. In the years between my conversion and formal theological training, I taught much of what I now see as a deleterious distortion of the gospel. But God showed me mercy in Christ Jesus by leading me away from such distortions. So, I do not write this from a desire to demean others; that would be sick and repugnant. Rather, I hope to make clear that while there may be reasons, even understandable reasons, for the attractiveness of the prosperity gospel, no reason is good enough to justify any distortion of God's Word. The stakes are infinitely high. What is at stake is how clearly people hear God's voice through the ministry of the Word and the majestic glory of God and the eternal salvation of human souls. Nothing could be weightier. What is written here, then, is my feeble attempt to uphold the seriousness of what is at stake.

So, what are some reasons for the attractiveness of the prosperity gospel? First and foremost, it has the appearance of being Scriptural. In fact, the vast majority of people who unintentionally teach and/or adhere to the prosperity gospel do so because they are convinced that it is biblical. They sincerely believe that they are taking God at His word. This belief is understandable, though deeply flawed.

A passage like 3 John 2 can easily be understood to teach that God has purposed for his children to be wealthy, healthy, and happy in this life. In the passage, John is praying for one of his churches and says, "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul." It is not hard to imagine someone reading this passage and thinking, "How could the passage be understood otherwise?" Here is an apostle praying under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for Christians to be healthy and to prosper (cf. Rom. 15:31; 2 Thess. 3:2; Ps. 67). Furthermore, 3 John 2 and similar prayers in the Bible are not the only Scriptural passages that allegedly teach the prosperity gospel.

The most compelling explicit promises for health and wealth, it is believed, come from the Old Testament. A passage like Deuteronomy 28:1-14 is a prime candidate. I indeed remember myself quoting this passage especially in prayers with confident anticipation of material blessings because I was convinced that such was God's promise to his people. So, one reason the prosperity gospel is hugely popular is that there seems to be biblical warrant for it. We should, however, note that prayers for health and prosperity

like 3 John 2 are just that—prayers. To say that the prosperity gospel is a distortion of the gospel of the cross is not the same thing as saying it is wrong to pray for health and wealth in this life as a Christian.

There is a world of difference between, on the one hand, believing that I can and should name anything and claim it because I am a child of the king of heaven and, on the other hand, praying for God to provide for my felt needs. The latter belief usually leads to celebrating the undeserved mercy of God when he grants the request (Phil. 2:28) and trusting his inscrutable wisdom and hoping in his greater purposes for the lives of his children when he doesn't grant the request (2 Cor. 12:8). The former belief, however, leads to blaming oneself for not having enough faith or, in extreme cases, questioning and even denying the goodness of God.

The question of using Old Testament promises in health/wealth beliefs and teaching is more expansive than can be explored here in detail. Suffice it to say that applying Old Testament promises given under the Mosaic covenant to the lives of new covenant believers without regard to the Christ event, constitutes an alarming misunderstanding of the way the covenants and storyline of the Bible work. Furthermore, such a practice reflects a patently inconsistent hermeneutic that picks and chooses the convenient portions of the Old Testament for the purposes of the reader. So, Bible readers who want to live and minister *under* the authority of the Bible must reject such practices.

Again, dire economic circumstances and health challenges can encourage and enhance belief in promises for improved life experiences. It is remarkable to see that, even though not native to them, the health and wealth gospel has gained a far greater momentum in much poorer countries of the world than it has in the western world from where the movement was birthed.<sup>12</sup> So there seems to be a very direct correlation between the popularity of the health and wealth gospel and the economic circumstances of devotees; the poorer, the more susceptible. Furthermore, pastors and teachers with hearts of compassion can be more tempted to apply what seems to them to be straightforward promises of health and wealth to the impoverished situations of those they love and to whom they minister.

However, there are more biblically faithful ways to address the question of poverty. One practical way is to encourage people to do “honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Eph.

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<sup>12</sup> Most trace the birth of the health-wealth movement to the US. See for example Ken L. Sarles, “A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (1986):329-330; Gregory K. Hollifield, “Does God Want You to Be Rich? A Practical Theologian’s Response to the Gospel of Prosperity,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology Volume* 15 (2011): 30-31.

4:28). The most important thing is to help people learn that, while Jesus healed many and miraculously fed many, he never got trapped in thinking that man's fundamental need is an improved socio-economic condition. His post-ascension words to the church in Smyrna likewise bear this out. "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 2:9). He could have changed the economic situation of the believers in Smyrna with the click of a finger. But he didn't. Instead, he said, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death" (Rev. 2:10-11). This shows us that the gospel of the cross does not derive from nor is its content to be shaped by the circumstances of those receiving it. Rather, the gospel of the cross speaks with redemptive and transformative power into every situation. It speaks to Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) and speaks to Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10).

Also, the impulse to define the goodness of God by our experience is etched into our fallen human nature. When our experiences are unpleasant, painful, and difficult, we tend to ask the famous "why" question. This tendency to question God's goodness often turns into despair and bitterness when we compare ourselves with others for whom life seems affluent and enjoyable. This was the Psalmist's experience until he entered the temple of the Lord and gained perspective (Psalm 73 cf. Jer. 12:1-4).

Given our innate tendency to measure God's goodness by how well things are going for us, we get easily convinced when someone claims that the God who loves us aims to fill our lives with wealth, health, and happiness. After all, how else could God set himself apart from the devil who comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). However, we should respond to this by saying that when humans start telling God how he ought to be good to them they have overstepped their bounds as creatures. The God of the Bible is one whose very being is loving kindness (Exod. 34:6-8; Tit. 3:4). And he knows how best to express that (Deut. 32:4). Ours is not a calling to prescribe how God's goodness and loving kindness should look. Only God has the right to do that.

Ours rather is a calling to trust with a trust that resounds with the worship of the Psalmist: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:25-26). This kind of trust worships even when the providence of God is perplexing and painful.

The fact that “the secret things belong to the LORD our God,” (Deut. 29:29) means that we don’t have to bear the crushing burden of trying to predict or prearrange the way our lives should turn out. The unsearchable ways of God should remind us that we do not have a puny little god who is totally predictable. On the contrary, our God fills heaven and earth (Jer. 23:24) and his ways surpass ours as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isa. 55:9). And “he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Psa. 136). “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:33-36).

A fourth reason is that we tend to measure our worth in terms of what we either have or do not have. So, the promise that God will make me healthier and wealthier is compelling and attractive because it will give me a more dignified standing in society. Instead of falling prey to this deadly snare, believers should live by Jesus’ kingdom principles, one of which says, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, *for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions*” (Luke 12:15, italics mine).

Fifth, it is a universal human problem that we completely lack the ability to correctly diagnose our most serious problem. Even professing believers in Jesus are not immune to this inability. The best human efforts often come up with sociological and economic diagnoses and solutions to the human predicament. In fact, I have heard a church member ask in frustration, “After all the preaching, then what?” The impulse voiced by that question goes something like this: “My greatest felt need cannot be fixed by preaching alone. So, if all the church can afford is preaching [as in, preaching Christ in the way that the apostle Paul did,] then the church has nothing to offer me.”

To this we must answer that man’s greatest problem is a problem of righteousness. “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:10-11). But amazingly enough, God has decisively solved that problem in the cross work of his son Jesus Christ because “all. . . are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:23-26).

What about the many and varied needs that we all face in this life? It is a valid question and Paul provides the most assuring answer. “He [that is, God] who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).

### *Some Dangers of the Prosperity Gospel*

We can say that preachers of the prosperity gospel make several alarming errors, not least of which is a biblical theological mistake. Prosperity preachers err by turning the clock forward in redemptive history. They attempt to appropriate for this life things which God has promised to His children in the life to come (Matt. 6:20; Luke 16; John 14:1; Eph. 2:6; Heb. 10:34; 11:39-40; 13:14; Rev. 7:15-17; 21-22:5). In truth, the promises of health-wealth theology are pathetically small compared to what God has promised his people.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, by speaking as if health and wealth in this life are at the center of the good news of Christ’s cross, the health-wealth movement, purposefully or not, fails to hear a critical fact: “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). But there is more. The prosperity gospel is a foe of the glorious hope that the gospel of the cross offers. It dangerously undermines the believer’s eager longing for the things that are unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). It devalues the fullness of joy and eternal pleasures stored up in God’s presence for those who endure to the end (Psa. 16:11).

The prosperity gospel also seduces believers away from the supernatural reality that a believer in Jesus can have an abundance of joy even in a severe test of affliction and extreme poverty (2 Cor. 8:2). It comes with a potential to destroy the believer’s capacity to “count it all joy . . . when you meet trials of various kinds” (James 1:2) because it denies that we are called to suffer (cf. Matt. 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:23-26; John 15:18-21; Phil. 1:29; 1 Thess. 3:3). It is opposed to the believer’s calling to learn “in whatever situation . . . to be content” (Phil. 4:11); to learn “how to be brought low” (Phil. 4:12); and to learn “the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need” (4:12). Rather than fan the flames of Godly contentment, even in hardships, the prosperity gospel extinguishes it and exposes its adherents to guile and deception.

The prosperity gospel empties out the edifying power of apostolic testimonies like Paul’s when he says, “We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities,

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<sup>13</sup> See more below.

beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” (2 Cor. 6:3–5). The health and wealth gospel has no concept of believers who go “about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (Heb. 11:37-38).

The prosperity gospel is also dangerous in that it turns a blind eye to the sobering truth that wealth comes with unique temptations. The Bible clearly teaches that wealth can delude the heart into a false sense of self-sufficiency that says, “who is the Lord” (Prov. 30:8-9). Someone can be saddened and walk away from Christ, because he or she has “great possessions” (Matt. 19:22). It is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25). Wealth can train us to be full of greed and deceive us that a man’s life consists in the abundance of his possession (Luke 12:15; cf. Jer. 9:22-23). It can turn us into lovers of pleasure whose motto is “relax, eat, drink, be merry” (Luke 12:19; cf. Isa. 22:12-13; 1 Cor. 15:19). It can destroy our eagerness to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven where they are eternally safe (Matt. 6:20). It can turn us into servants of money (Matt. 6:20). It can hinder men from becoming qualified for the office of elder or deacon (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2). Our hearts can be deluded to boast in riches rather than in the Lord (Jer. 9:23-24; Ps. 52:7). Wealth can deceive a person and choke out the word of God in their hearts making the word unfruitful (Mark. 4:19). The health-wealth movement conveniently ignores these calamitous dangers and more to the great peril of its devotees. At the end of the day, the prosperity gospel is not only false, it is deadly.

#### *Does the Bible Teach that Poverty Is Piety?*

The previous paragraphs are not intended to glorify poverty. Not in the least, for the Bible doesn’t. But what about James? He says, “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits” (James 1:9-11). Does James teach here that the poor are righteous, and the rich are unrighteous? Remarkably enough, James uses the phrase “the lowly brother.” Use of “brother” means that he is referring to a believer, a member of the family of God. “Lowly” is used to describe people of insignificant social status (cf. Luke 1:48). In the LXX,<sup>14</sup> it is

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<sup>14</sup> LXX refers to the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Old Testament.

often used to describe widows and orphans. As can be expected then, included with this low social status, is poverty.

In fact, James says, “has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?” (James 2:5). In contrast, the rich man is told to boast “in his humiliation.” James has in mind the end time humiliation that will come at the last judgment. He speaks in irony to make the point that the unbelieving rich person’s boasting is empty because an inescapable humiliation will be his at the final judgment.

Nevertheless, we should not conclude that James believes that poverty is piety and affluence is impiety. Rather, James was using language that reflected the general outlook of his community. It was the case that most in James’ community were poor. It does not follow that the rich are damned and the poor are saved. Having wealth neither commends nor condemns a person. A rich person’s commendation or condemnation will come from whether they boast in their wealth or in God. The Bible’s verdict on a person’s standing before God is never based on the good fortune (that is, the health and wealth) they have or do not have. It is based on personal faith, or the lack thereof, in the atoning merit of Christ’s death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 10:9).

So, the Bible’s call to godliness is not a call to be as poor as possible. The biblical portrait of wealth in relation to the believer is neither that every believer will be poor nor that every wealthy person will be damned. Neither does the Bible promise wealth for every believer in the present life. God’s will for every believer, whether rich or poor, is godliness with contentment. Hebrews puts it like this: “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). One fruit of saving grace in the lives of believers is that they learn the secret of being content regardless of circumstances (Phil. 4:12).

In fact, believers are to be so satisfied and secure in God and his pledge to never leave them that they “can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me”” (Heb. 13:6). This, at least in part, is the reason Proverbs says, “Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist. When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven” (Prov. 23:4-5).<sup>15</sup> To think and live otherwise is to open up oneself to horrifying dangers. “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge

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<sup>15</sup> Proverbs is obviously not calling people to laziness, since the same book decries indolence (cf. Prov. 12:24, 27; 19:15; 22:13; 26:13; 31:27). Rather the proverb is warning against working for money as if money can provide ultimate security.



people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Tim. 6:9-11). Regardless of socio-economic circumstances, apart from the saving grace of Jesus, most humans will seek contentment, security, and a sense of worth in possessions. But to those adorned with salvation, Jesus says, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

### *A Call to Stewardship, Not Comfort*

Part of God’s sovereign choice is to give riches and material wealth to some in the church. We have biblical examples of rich individuals using their wealth to get moneybags that do not grow old by paying for ministry costs to ensure gospel advance. Priscilla and Aquilla had a large enough house that they could host a church (1 Cor. 16:19). Some believing women who had been healed by Jesus traveled with him and paid for his expenses (Luke 8:1-3). Lydia, a rich businesswoman, used her wealth to show hospitality to Paul and his missionary companions (Acts 16:15). Many believe, for good reason, that Theophilus was the patron who sponsored the publication of Luke’s writings (Luke 1:1-4, Acts 1:1-2).<sup>16</sup>

But paying for ministry costs is entrusted not only to the rich but to every believer. Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 reflect God’s will for all his people regarding giving. People with limited means are not excluded since the text says, “*each of you* is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper” (1 Cor. 16:2).<sup>17</sup> The Macedonians prove this beyond reasonable doubt (2 Cor. 8:2-5). This is why we must say that believers are called to stewardship, not comfort.

The Bible clearly states that those who go out to preach the gospel are fellow workers for the truth with those who give to pay for the expenses of the goers (3 John 6b-8). So, every redeemed person should do honest work with their hands (Eph. 4:28) and disavow any form of fraud and theft. They should pray for God’s blessings (Deut. 8:18; Psa. 67:6-7). If the Lord brings great financial and material blessings through such work and business dealings, they should guard themselves from haughtiness, enjoy such as a rich supply from the Lord and lavishly give and be rich in good works (1 Tim. 6:17).

If God allows a season of need and poverty in which we lack certain things, we should remember that “your heavenly Father knows that you need them all” (Matt. 6:32). “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up

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<sup>16</sup> This is just a very small sampling and does not even mention the countless Old Testament saints like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, etc., who were outstandingly rich.

<sup>17</sup> Italics mine.

for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). Therefore, we have a guarantee in the gift of God’s Son that he will “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11).

### *Conclusion*

Believers in Jesus hope for far more than this life and what it offers. We are promised that we will inherit the world (Matt. 5:5; Rom. 4:13). God has immeasurable riches of grace in kindness towards us to display in the coming age (Eph. 2:7). What awaits all believers at the end of the age is an eternal reign and an incontestable throne (Rom. 8:17; Rev. 2:26-27). We aren’t merely promised good health. We are promised glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15:49-55). But our greatest joy lies not in the things we will get but in the experience of a never diminishing and never-ending honeymoon with the husband to whom we are now betrothed (2 Cor. 11:2). With all the hindrances of sin and the weaknesses of our fallen bodies removed, we will enjoy our Lord with unhindered enjoyment. What was lost in the garden will be restored and surpassed thanks to the redemptive accomplishment of Christ’s cross. “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3–4). Such is the heritage of those who rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2). So, we should guard ourselves against the prosperity gospel because it obscures, distorts, and undermines this glorious hope.

### **Islam**<sup>18</sup>

Besides Christianity (broadly defined), Islam is the only other religion that is not indigenous to Africa but has widespread influence on the continent. Islamic tradition claims that Africa first encountered Islam when she extended hospitality to Islamic converts fleeing persecution in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> These Islamic refugees are said to have settled in Abyssinia (Ethiopia).<sup>20</sup> Azuma argues that this scenario in which Muslims arrive, are welcomed, and live under

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<sup>18</sup> This treatment of Islam in Africa is intended to be brief. Those interested in reading a scholarly treatment on Islam in the context of other African religions can consult a resource like Lamin Sanneh, *The Crown and the Turban: Muslims and West African Pluralism* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> John Azumah, “Patterns of Christian-Muslim Encounters in Africa,” in *The African Christian and Islam*, eds. John Azumah and Lamin Sanneh (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Monographs, 2013), 42.

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

an African political system repeated itself for a number of centuries “throughout the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.”<sup>21</sup>

Africa’s second encounter with Islam was very different from the first. This time the Muslims came as invaders and rulers. The phenomenon of Islamic conquest also spread through the rest of the continent. It should be noted that the Christians who lived in North and Northeastern Africa also fought wars for their faith. The outcome of the violent attacks on non-Muslims by invading Muslims produced suspicion, fear, and hatred against Muslims. This sentiment of suspicion, fear and hostility is certainly not a continent-wide phenomenon today. Nevertheless, it is still experienced by some countries and regions of present-day Africa. In some places, non-Muslims live with deep suspicion and fear of what could be coming next in terms of a Jihadi attack. Militant Islamic organizations of today have helped to exacerbate these fears. Such groups include the likes of Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria, ISIS and Al Qaeda related groups in the Sahel (particularly Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), Al Shabab in Somalia and related violent groups in Mozambique.

My point here is that the reality of physical harm and martyrdom is a real challenge that militant Islam poses to the church in some parts of present-day Africa. Besides the specific danger from militant Islam, there is a real fear of being shunned if someone were to step out of a traditionally Islamic community and embrace Christianity. Individuals in such communities recognize that there is a high social price to be paid by anyone who repudiates the religion that their family has practiced for generations. Oh, for a church that will, with trembling and unshakable hope, say with its Lord, “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

Another challenge that Islam poses to the church is almost the exact opposite of the one stated above. Some communities, and even whole nations with a strong Pan-African bent, tend to think of Islam as a belief system that shares significant overlap with, and therefore greater respect toward, a traditional African worldview. Social practices like polygamy are affirmed and accepted (and may be even celebrated) by both worldviews.<sup>22</sup> Also Islam promotes practices like divination and the production of amulets. This tenet of the religion makes it attractive to people looking at the world from a tradition-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> It should be stated here that polygamy is no longer as common among the younger generation of Africans. Also, a Christian friend told me, much to my fascination, that Tunisia is the only country in the Muslim majority world where polygamy is against the law.

al African worldview perspective. For such individuals and communities, Islam provides a way to relate with the supernatural (or so it is believed) without overly disrupting and/or denigrating the African culture and way of life.

Christianity on the other hand is, in such communities, perceived with some resentment because it demands an abandonment of some of the fundamental beliefs and cherished ways of life. So, the church is viewed as an entity that promotes a message whose aim is to destroy the “African way of life” (cf. Acts 19:23-27). The church therefore faces the challenge to find a way of prophetically calling unsaved people in Africa to turn to “God from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9) while truly celebrating the noble aspects of the distinctively African culture and way of life (1 Cor. 9:20-23).

Another related challenge for the church is that some in Africa hold to a perception of Christianity that advantages Islam and African traditional religions. What I mean is that some Africans tend to see Christianity as the white man’s religion. The view that Christianity belongs to a certain sector of the human race and not Africans creates obstacles for the message of the church. Others in Africa consider Christianity as a vehicle of western colonialism, imperialism, and hegemony. People in this category are often the more educated and have a keen sense of the real and verifiable abuses committed by various western nations in many parts of Africa.<sup>23</sup> For such individuals, Islam (or any other belief system for that matter) is to be preferred over Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

The opportunity is the church’s to take and show that she exists because God graciously chose a middle eastern nomad who worshipped idols and promised to bless all the nations of the earth in his seed (Gen. 12:3; Josh.

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<sup>23</sup> An example of such a view is mildly stated in the words of the famous Anglican archbishop, Desmond Tutu, who is reported to have said, “When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land.” See <https://marleyk.medium.com/when-the-missionaries-came-to-africa-they-had-the-bible-and-we-had-the-land-a460031ead4e>. Note that I am not saying that everyone who views Christianity as somehow associated with western imperialism becomes a Muslim. Quite clearly Desmond Tutu is not a Muslim. My point is that where Christianity is closely associated with western hegemony, the message of the church is viewed with suspicion, if not hostility.

<sup>24</sup> There is historical documentation of how Arab Muslims undertook a far-reaching slave trade especially in East Africa. However, such realities tend to be ignored by people who argue that Christianity was a vehicle for western abuses. See for example the following article <https://www.dw.com/en/east-africas-forgotten-slave-trade/a-50126759>. A better way of thinking about this is to recognize that all people are depraved (Rom. 3:10-20) and given the chance will use any opportunity and/or advantage they have to subjugate others. The fact that people committed atrocities in the name of Christianity is horrific and never to be condoned or made light of in any way. Nevertheless, such tragedies do not define Christianity because the Christian message consistently condemns such wickedness and any and all forms of ethnic superiority. See for example Tit. 3:3-7 and Col. 3:11.

24:2-3). This God, at the fullness of time, sent that seed who, by his death, ransomed people for God from every tribe and people of earth—including Africa (Gal. 4:4; Rev. 5:9). The Ethiopian eunuch, an African born and bred, never thought of the Christian gospel as something for a particular stripe of the human race (Acts 8:26-40).<sup>25</sup> So, the claim that Christianity is the white man's religion is to be totally rejected. Furthermore, the church must never flag in the all-important responsibility to trumpet the good news that, like all the peoples of the world, God always had the peoples of Africa in mind through the course of the unfolding story of his work of redemption as told in the Bible.

A more practical (and in some cases day-to-day) challenge that the church has to grapple with in some parts of Africa is that some African countries are organized and run on the basis of Islamic law. In such countries there is great difficulty in living as a Christian and no apparent hope for any kind of religious freedom. Just making a public profession of faith in Jesus could result in a long prison term or death in some cases. Furthermore, practical needs that soon arise in the work of evangelism, discipleship, and church planting such as finding a place to meet, getting government authorization, etc., constitute almost impossible challenges to overcome in such contexts. Mauritania would be an example of such a country. This snapshot description of what happens in Mauritania helps to paint a picture:

There are extreme restrictions on freedom of religion and belief in Mauritania; it is one of thirteen countries in the world that punish atheism by death. On 27 April 2018, The National Assembly passed a law that makes the death penalty mandatory for anyone convicted of "blasphemous speech" and acts deemed "sacrilegious". The new law eliminates the possibility under article 306 of substituting prison terms for the death penalty for certain apostasy-related crimes if the offender promptly repents. The law also provides for a sentence of up to two years in prison and a fine of up to 600,000 Ouguiyas (approximately EUR 14,630) for "offending public indecency and Islamic val-

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<sup>25</sup> See Coye Still's heart-warming treatment of "The Church in Africa in Relation to the Global Church" in the present volume. This chapter very helpfully shows that, like all the peoples of the world, the peoples of Africa were always in view in the unfolding story of God's work of redemption as told in the Bible.

ues" and for "breaching Allah's prohibitions" or assisting in their breach.<sup>26</sup>

It is thus not surprising that Mauritania is almost 100% Muslim and that the majority of nearly 4,500 Roman Catholics in Mauritania are mostly foreign residents from West Africa and Europe. A similar example is found in some parts of northern Nigeria. Twelve of Nigeria's thirty-six states legally operate on Sharia law within the legal framework of the country's Constitution. These are Zamfara, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, and Yobe.<sup>27</sup> Living as a Christian in these states or attempting any kind of gospel work in any of these states will very much be like the experience to be expected in Mauritania.

This all seems dark and hopeless. But there is great comfort for the church in the fact that her Lord and King is the one who said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36). And that kingdom, though not of this world, grows unstoppably in this world (including in Mauritania and the twelve Nigerian states and everywhere else). "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened" (Matt. 13:31-33).

## **Roman Catholicism**

The challenges posed by Roman Catholicism (RC) to the church in Africa are of a very different sort than what comes from Islam. This is the case because the average onlooker thinks of the Roman Catholic church as a Christian church. However, no one ever mistakes Islam for anything Christian. Evangelical Christians don't have to strive to set themselves apart from Muslims. That is obvious to everyone. With respect to RC, however, many people get confused when a Baptist church member, for example, says they differ markedly

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<sup>26</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mauritania>. Mauritania is classed among the ten most discriminatory countries in matters of religion. See <https://humanists.international/what-we-do/freedom-of-thought-report/>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.qch.ox.ac.uk/content/sharia-implementation-northern-nigeria-after-15-years>

on certain points of doctrine and practice from their neighbor who attends a local Roman Catholic church. Why the confusion?

To begin with, RC never presents as a different religion. It is referred to as the Roman Catholic *Church*. In fact, for some, it is an oxymoron to talk of challenges posed by the Roman Catholic church to the church. Furthermore, RC affirms some of the core doctrines of historic Protestantism. For example, it affirms the trinitarian nature of God, the full humanity and divinity of Jesus, the personhood and divinity of the Holy Spirit, and the virgin birth of Jesus. It also adheres to a biblical definition of gender, human sexuality, and the family. This latter point is a matter of great significance to the vast majority of the general populace in Africa who are generally not unaware of the moral and sexual revolution ravaging the landscape of western nations.

Additionally, RC has established a very significant positive reputation for herself on the continent of Africa particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. This includes the simple, but very significant, reality of the sheer size of the Roman Catholic Church on the African continent. Just how many people identify as Roman Catholics in Africa is a very noteworthy factor in the consideration of the challenges that Catholicism poses to gospel work. Some estimate that number at 200 million.<sup>28</sup> This is an impressive 29% of the estimated 685 million professing Christians in Africa. This means that almost 3 out of every 10 African Christians are Roman Catholics. To some people this is a powerful commendation of the Roman Catholic Church.

If size makes right, then the Roman Catholic Church is the church to trust. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic denomination is reputed for owning the biggest and most impressive church buildings and running some of the finest educational and healthcare institutions, orphanages, and other social services. RC's large membership and wealth makes it easier and more reasonable (especially in the shame/honor dynamic of Africa) to identify with it than speak against it. Another matter of significance is the fact that the Roman Catholic Church tends to be quite a force in politics in many places on the African continent. Protestant churches and other Christian groups are most often on the margins in political affairs.<sup>29</sup> This often leads the average observer to believe that RC is a more reliable voice against government corruption and authoritarian rulers/governments than most other Christian groups.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49564397>

<sup>29</sup> For example, the mediation in talks aimed at a peaceful transfer of power in the Congo; see <https://www.hrw.org/blog-feed/democratic-republic-congo-crisis>

The last point I wish to consider here requires a bit more explanation. It has to do with the notion of inculturation and operates in a very similar way to one of the challenges discussed above under Islam. Inculturation often conveys the simple notion that the church in Africa should operate in a way that reflects an awareness of the culture around her. But in reality, what ends up happening is a blending of notions from RC and ATRs to produce a religion that still retains the shell of RC but the content is significantly different. Speaking about evangelism and inculturation, Pope John Paul II stated:

With regards to African Traditional Religions, a serene and prudent dialogue will be able, on the one hand, to protect Catholics from negative influences which condition the way of life of many of them and, on the other hand, to foster the assimilation of positive values such as belief in a Supreme Being who is Eternal, Creator, Provident and Just Judge, values which are readily harmonized with the content of the faith. They can even be seen as a *preparation for the Gospel*, because they contain precious *semina Verbi* [seeds of the Word] which can lead, as already happened in the past, a great number of people 'to be open to the fullness of Revelation in Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel.' (1995: 67).<sup>30</sup>

Akrong and Azuma take these words and perspective as a welcome development. They argue that in inculturation "African Traditional Religions are taken as normative in any construction of an African Christian identity and spirituality. ATRs therefore remain the unmistakable substructure for Christian spirituality and the hermeneutical key for African self-theologizing."<sup>31</sup> Akrong and Azuma are representative of African intellectuals who believe that African Traditional Religions and culture have not usually been accorded the respect and recognition they deserve by the west in general and by Christianity in particular.

RC, on the other hand (at least in recent decades), seems to both respect and embrace practices that are embedded in ATRs. Not surprisingly, therefore,

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<sup>30</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_14091995\\_ecclesia-in-africa.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html). I encountered this material through reading A. Abraham Akrong and John Azumah, "Hermeneutical and Theological Resources in African Traditional Religions for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa," in *The African Christian and Islam*, ed. John Azumah and Lamin Sanneh (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Monographs, 2013), 70–72.

<sup>31</sup> Akrong and Azumah, "Hermeneutical and Theological Resources in African Traditional Religions for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa," 70



RC is easily viewed and treated as a more commendable faith than a seemingly overzealous church, preacher or missionary of another Christian denomination who wants to call Africans to completely repudiate ancestral beliefs and practices. The celebration of RC's inculturation reaches beyond the circles of African intellectuals. For the average African on the street, inculturation means that he can be a church member in good standing without having to worry that he will be required to renounce his ancestral religion. In fact, I remember, from my growing up years, a trend whereby men who were disciplined from a protestant church for unrepentant sin either joined a local Roman Catholic congregation or became Muslims.<sup>32</sup> Both religious contexts welcomed these people without requiring of them what the protestant churches from which they went out were asking of them. For these individuals, the Roman Catholic church is (by their experience) more welcoming than other Christian groups.

The issues discussed above are by no means exhaustive but they represent some of the realities that make RC a very significant challenge to gospel work. By gospel work I am specifically referring to work that is animated by the truths that eternal salvation is available for everyone but this salvation only comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone based on Scripture alone (the sixty-six books of the Bible) all to the glory of God alone.

### *Much Ado About Nothing?*

To conclude the discussion on the challenges posed by RC to the church in Africa, it is helpful to briefly mention the key ways that biblical Christianity parts ways with RC.<sup>33</sup> I do not intend to mention every conceivable difference. Rather, I would like to represent enough differences to show that RC, as organized religion, is really not a church biblically defined. For clarity's sake, I will group the differences under five main headings

*The Bible.* In addition to the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments which constitute the only basis of faith for believers in the protestant tradi-

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<sup>32</sup> These were not individuals who cared about the total beliefs of these groups. They simply wanted a place where they can have some kind of religious community without the requirement to give up something in their lives.

<sup>33</sup> The official catechism of the Roman Catholic church in various languages can be found here. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM). I greatly appreciated and borrowed from Kevin DeYoung's concise and clear articulation of some of the most outstanding differences between Protestantism and RC see <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/protestant-and-catholic-whats-the-difference/>.

tion, RC adds books called the Apocrypha.<sup>34</sup> These include Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Sirach, and Baruch. The church of Rome also teaches that “both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.”<sup>35</sup> Also, RC entrusts the “task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, . . . to the living, teaching, office of the Church alone . . . to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.”<sup>36</sup> Protestantism believes that “God alone is Lord of the conscience; and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to His word, or not contained in it.”<sup>37</sup> But RC does not hesitate to bind the consciences of men with a pronouncement of the pope. It only suffices that such a pronouncement was uttered *ex cathedra* (meaning when he makes official pronouncements about matters of doctrine).

### *Salvation*

First, RC anathematizes everyone who believes and teaches that a believer in Jesus is justified (i.e., counted righteous) before God through faith alone based exclusively on Christ’s finished work on the cross. The official position of the Roman Catholic church states, “If anyone says, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of grace and charity that is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favor of God: let him be anathema.”<sup>38</sup> RC includes in justification both renewal of the inner man and reconciliation. These are important aspects of our salvation but the Bible never subsumes them under justification. When it comes to justification, the Bible states, for example, “We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16). Or “the free gift is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification” (Rom.

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<sup>34</sup> This term comes from the Greek word *apokrypha* which means “hidden.” It has been used since the third century to refer the collection of books not found in the Hebrew OT or the Greek NT. For a helpful discussion on this subject see John Piper, *A Peculiar Glory: How the Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 39-88.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/protestant-and-catholic-whats-the-difference/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/protestant-and-catholic-whats-the-difference/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://yotiyn.infiniteuploads.cloud/2017/06/Immanuel-Doctrinal-Statement.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.thecouncilofkent.com/ch6.htm>

5:16). Or “to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5).

Second, RC teaches the infamous doctrine of purgatory which basically says that believers who die while still having imperfections are saved eternally but must be purified in purgatory.<sup>39</sup> Consistent with this belief and teaching, RC prays for the dead stating, “The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, the church goes so far as to say of those who die without hearing the gospel, “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.”<sup>41</sup>

Bible-believing Christians will contest the notion of purgatory by referring to the Bible which says, “Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9:27-28). RC’s teaching on those who die without hearing the gospel falls far short of biblical fidelity because “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:19-20). And, as a result, “all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law” (Rom. 2:12).

Protestants believe that salvation (past, present, and future) is all by grace (1 Cor. 15:1-2; Phil. 2:12-13). RC on the other hand claims that “Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.”<sup>42</sup>

### *The Church*

Who belongs to the church is understood very differently in Roman Catholic theology than in Protestantism. RC believes that those “fully incorporated into

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.catholic.com/tract/purgatory>

<sup>40</sup> <https://stmaryoldtown.org/all-saints-and-all-souls>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=3077>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=5555>

the society of the Church are those who . . . are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules here through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops.”<sup>43</sup> Protestantism, on her part, maintains, according to the Scriptures, that the church is made up of those who “have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18). Such individuals are “no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:19-22).

Furthermore, in RC Christ rules over his church through the supreme pope and bishops. The pope is believed (as stated above) to be infallible when he makes official doctrinal pronouncements. Protestants will, true to their name, protest that Scripture places no mediator between Christ and the church. It simply states that “Christ is the head of the church” (Eph. 5:23).

#### *The Ordinances or Sacraments*

Besides baptism and the Lord’s Supper—the only two ordinances or sacraments observed in Protestantism (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26)—RC adds five others - penance, holy orders, marriage, confirmation, and last rites. Catholics believe that during Mass, the bread and wine are changed (or transubstantiated) into the actual, physical body and blood of Jesus Christ. So, in RC, the Lord’s Supper is not a remembrance and proclamation of Christ’s sacrifice as it is understood in protestant tradition (1 Cor. 11:24-26) but the same atoning work: “The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice . . . the sacrifice [of the Eucharist] is truly propitiatory.”<sup>44</sup>

Catholics also teach that “justification is conferred in Baptism.”<sup>45</sup> The waters of baptism, Catholics teach, wash away original sin and join us with Christ. Baptism is not merely a sign and seal of grace, but actually confers saving grace. Over against this view protestants go to great lengths to explain that baptism confers no saving grace in and of itself. Rather, “Baptism, . . . now saves you, *not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*” (1 Pet. 3:21).

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/para/837.htm>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/para/1367.htm>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=5534>

## *Mary*

In Roman Catholic belief, Mary was conceived without original sin and “was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things” (assumption).<sup>46</sup> She intercedes for the church, “continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation,”<sup>47</sup> and is “a mother to us in the order of grace.”<sup>48</sup> RC further claims that “The Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.”<sup>49</sup> Protestants rightly object that what the Bible says of Mary is quite simply that she was “a virgin betrothed to a man” (Luke 1:27) and she was exceptionally favored and the Lord was with her (Luke 1:28). In fact, Jesus made sure that there was no undue emphasis laid on the blessedness of Mary (Luke 11:27-28). Mary is referred to as “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43) and herself affirmed that “all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48). But there is no indication anywhere in scripture that Mary was untouched by the corruption of the fall (cf. Rom. 3:10-20). Also, the Bible nowhere indicates that Mary is given any status and function in the church as “Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.” Her assumption (as it is called) is also without scriptural substantiation.

Hopefully the preceding paragraphs have helped to show that the effort to set the church in distinction from RC is not much ado about nothing. RC poses several challenges to gospel work everywhere and the African continent is no exception. This means that knowing these challenges and seeking to minister in ways that help people to see their need for Christ is not only good, it is necessary.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has dealt with several challenges the church faces. This is not meant to discourage. It is an attempt to emulate the kind of candor we find in the Bible. In the Bible, challenges, difficulties, sin, and depravity are the background against which the blazing glory of the gospel shines. So the next chapter gives attention to seemingly weak steps of obedience by means of which God delights to mediate his power both to save the lost and to strengthen the saved.

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<sup>46</sup> <http://www.sborromeo.org/ccc/para/966.htm>

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.sborromeo.org/ccc/para/969.htm>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=3174>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=3174>

PART THREE



PRACTICAL  
APPLICATIONS



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## CHAPTER 5

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### **NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES AND STEWARDED THE OPPORTUNITIES**

- Jones Ndzi -

Gospel work is always characterized by things for which to give great thanks and things for which to pray and labor in earnest to see change. The letters of the NT bear this out (see, for example, 1 Cor. 1:4-10; 5:1-13; 7-15). In the spirit of the NT letters, this chapter sets forth suggested responses to the challenges discussed in the previous chapter.

#### **SUGGESTED RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES DISCUSSED IN CHAPTER FOUR**

The ideas set forth here are presented in a spirit of hopeful celebration. What I mean by that is that I am celebrating the triumph of the gospel across much of Africa while hoping for more gospel fruit and gospel strength in and through the church. So, the discussion here is not intended to minimize, ignore or disparage the much good work that has happened in the past and is currently happening in many places. Rather, I present this discussion in hope of encouraging such labors and stirring up many more laborers unto similar love and good works. Another clarification that should be mentioned here is that the responses discussed below are impossible to practice in a sustained way without pastoral leadership that is eager to discharge the duties of the pastoral office. The reader will find that pastoral leadership is assumed at several points. Finally, in an effort to make the section easier to read, I have grouped what is said here under three main headings.

#### **Instructional and Doctrinal Responses**

Instruction in and application of sound doctrine are crucial for the church in meeting contextual challenges in Africa. I will mention five instructional and doctrinal responses.



## *Teaching*

Teaching is a sort of catch-all response. There is no season in a believer or church's life when teaching is superfluous. So, every challenge can and should be dealt with by giving sound and relevant instruction from the Scriptures. For example, many believers in Africa come to faith from a background of allegiances to several different deities. Some have been involved with or tormented by magic and witchcraft practices of varied sorts and degrees. So, a renewed mind that is saturated with the truths of Scripture is always urgently needed to help the believers be "rooted and grounded in love," "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge," and "be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:18, 19).

Paul knew that the Ephesians were saved from a background of idolatry and magic practices (Acts 19:11-41). So, in writing his letter to the Ephesians, he provides profound truths to help build a new way of understanding reality. He starts off with praise to the God who has blessed believers with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3). This God chose these believers even before the foundation of the world and will ultimately unite all things in heaven and on earth under one head—Christ—at the fullness of time (Eph. 1:1-14). Paul deploys truths about the supremacy of Christ over demons (1:19-22) and shows how believers share in Christ's exaltation (2:6). He gives instruction on the subject of spiritual warfare and how believers must wage that warfare (Eph. 6:10-20). All these are truths that will fuel and embolden the obedience of faith in the lives of people who were once enslaved by magical beliefs and practices.

So, expository preaching and teaching of the Scriptures is and will always remain an outstanding need for the church everywhere. It is certainly an outstanding need for the church in Africa where many struggle with some of the fears and questions that the Ephesians would have had.<sup>1</sup> Other areas calling out for Bible-saturated instruction include suffering,<sup>2</sup> the God-glorifying beauty of gospel-trans-

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<sup>1</sup> As stated above, this need is not an African phenomenon. No believer or church ever matures more than it knows. The need to teach and be taught "what accords with sound doctrine" (Tit. 2:1) is a perennial need for every believer and every church no matter their geographical location.

<sup>2</sup> Having been saved from a worldview in which tragedies are often interpreted as proof of the displeasure of the gods makes a biblical theology of suffering particularly needed for many believers in Africa. Even more dire are the distortions that some Christians imbibe from the health wealth movement. Besides trusting the Lord to miraculously heal sicknesses and bring breakthroughs in various afflictions, many need to "know that we are destined for [afflictions]" (1 Thess. 3:3). In fact, tribulations are the path through which we enter the kingdom of heaven God (Acts 14:22) because through them the genuineness of our faith is proven (1 Pet. 1:6-9; cf. Rom. 5:1-5; James 1:2-4). Here is an excellent eight-part seminar designed and taught in a local church context in Sub-Saharan Africa, <https://ebcnairobi.com/core-seminars/suffering/>.

formed multi-ethnicity in a local church, LGBTQ+ issues,<sup>3</sup> as well as a Christian understanding of wealth, health, and material prosperity among others.

### *Persuasion*

Pastoral ministry/leadership is meant, among other things, to help the world see something of “the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:1). This Christ-likeness is, generally, better portrayed by entreaty and persuasion than by an eagerness to exercise authority (Phlm. 8-10). But the temptation to wield authority more forcefully and, more often than necessary, is a very present one in many (and maybe most) places in Africa. This is because one great blessing for pastors on the African continent is that there is generally an aura of trust on the part of church members toward their pastors.<sup>4</sup> This blessing does, however, have an in-built temptation that the church and pastors must guard against. For the pastors, the temptation is to lead more by an exercise of authority than by persuasion.<sup>5</sup> Even in matters of Christian liberty and practical ministry questions, a pastor can be tempted to foist his preference on the people he is called to lead. Paul said, “knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others” (2 Cor. 5:11). Paul believed in using persuasion even when talking about the very center of the gospel (2 Cor. 5:14, 15; cf. Acts 19:9). We will do well to follow this apostolic model.

### *Warning and Shunning*

The realities of life in a fallen world show that sometimes teaching and persuasion alone will not produce the desired results. This is why the church

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<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that LGBTQ+ questions are an area in which the church on the African continent is clearly lacking in sound biblical instruction that is articulated in a way that is contextually relevant. LGBTQ+ lifestyles are illegal in most countries in Africa right now (see, for example, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-59062483>). That is a common grace to celebrate. However, the church will be failing if she doesn't disciple her members to face LGBTQ+ type sins with gospel truth. African believers in general need to recognize that LGBTQ+ sins are not uniquely western. They are a fruit of our common depravity as humans. Praise be to God that the gospel is powerful to break the power of every type of sin including LGBTQ+ sins. “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9–11). It is more likely than not that there are African brothers and sisters who are tempted towards LGBTQ+ sins but are hindered from getting the gospel help they need because of the way the African church at large often talks about these things. Simplistic and misleading ideas about LGBTQ+ sins like “homosexuality is demonic” or “western governments are forcing it on us” neither extol the glory of the gospel nor do they give grace to those who need it to make progress in their fight against these sins.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, in many cases there is trust to a fault. Nevertheless, the reality of church members trusting their leaders (who are trustworthy) is a blessing.

<sup>5</sup> For the church the temptation can involve allowing trust for someone in leadership to blind the church to sins in the man's life that even disqualify him from the pastoral office (1 Tim. 5:20). Such a scenario weakens the church and over time discredits that church's gospel witness.

must warn people who won't submit to teaching and persuasion. As a church leader, Titus was to "exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you" (Tit. 2:15). In some cases, the exercise of such authority calls the pastor(s) to "charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:3). In fact, the Bible commands that individuals who won't repent after warnings should be shunned. "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Tit. 3:10-11; 1 Tim. 1:1:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:16-18; 2 Cor. 13:2-4). If these graces are consistently applied "without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality" (1 Tim. 5:21) much good will be done to the church. It will be a powerful and life-giving breath of fresh air in the suffocating experience of husbands lording it over wives and parents over children and village/tribal rulers over subjects and public officials over their constituents. It is generally true that many on the African continent are starving for the beauty of authoritative (not authoritarian) servant leadership which is humbly exercised under the authority of Christ. Pastors have "authority that the Lord has given. . . for building up and not for tearing down" (2 Cor. 13:10) and churches are blessed when that authority is used as such.

### *Training*

The most reliable and most effective ministers are those who, with courage and humility, set forth the whole counsel of God before their brothers and sisters. But such ministers don't come about by happenstance. They must be "trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed" (1 Tim. 4:6). This means that the church in Africa must continue to strategically invest in the training of her ministers. Such investments certainly include equipping ministers through the traditional seminary model.<sup>6</sup> Most people doing gospel work on the African continent today would agree that the need for well-trained gospel ministers has never been more acute. Therefore, the more people acquiring

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<sup>6</sup> The following link provides a list of the institutions accredited by ACTEA (Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa); <http://www.acteaweb.org>. I am also delightfully aware that there are far more efforts providing solid gospel training on the continent that do not appear on this list. Schools such as ACU (<http://acu-zambia.com>), extension sites of trusted schools like BCS Yaoundé (<https://bcsmn.edu/yaounde/>), others like [www.trainingleadersinternational.org](http://www.trainingleadersinternational.org), [www.ebcnairobi.com/out-reach/theological-training](http://www.ebcnairobi.com/out-reach/theological-training), <https://www.abtc.org.za>, are examples of such. What a gift to the church if a brother or sister could compile the most exhaustive list of all the trusted theological institutions on the African continent. Such a list can then be published online to help point people seeking training to known and trusted schools. The list can then always be updated periodically.

seminary training, the better for the church.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, local churches must continue to invest in the strengthening of existing seminaries and the creation of new ones. They must also strive to creatively make such training accessible to as many people as possible. This will, without doubt, include efforts in creating extension centers and the creative/innovative use of remote instruction where internet availability makes that possible.

Traditional seminary training is, however, only one of several approaches to training manpower for the church. As a matter of fact, the immensity of the need demands more than just the traditional seminary model. There is a great need for more informal training.<sup>8</sup> One under-exploited avenue is the area of ministry apprenticeship. Local church pastors need to recover the genius of Paul's strategy to ensure the preservation of the gospel.<sup>9</sup> He could not think of a better strategy than for pastors to entrust the gospel they have received "to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). Few avenues are more effective for this effort than a small group of young men gifted in teaching and leadership who are then selected to be trained. Such a training will allow them to ask questions, participate with the pastor in the work of the ministry (as appropriate) and then be sent out to multiply themselves in similar ways as they do the work of the ministry (cf. Mark 3:14). This will work anywhere! The details of meeting times, the pattern of the meetings, the duration of the training, the practical ministry questions that get asked, etc., will vary from place to place but this training will work everywhere. It is in fact one of the best ways to prepare people for formal seminary training and also to launch out recent seminary graduates for effective work.

### *Publication*

It is certainly the case that not every pastor or believer is called to write. But it is beyond question that some are called to write for the benefit of believers beyond their immediate ministry stations. Brothers and sisters so gifted should give them-

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<sup>7</sup> I praise the Lord for an initiative like <https://langham.org/what-we-do/langham-scholars/> that is helping many (not just in Africa) acquire advance training. Oh, for more of such!

<sup>8</sup> Examples of such less formal initiatives will include the likes of <https://teachingtruthinternational.org/construction/>, <https://trainingleadersinternational.org/where-we-work/58/cote-divoire-abidjan>, <https://trainingleadersinternational.org/where-we-work/25/ethiopia-hawassa>, and [www.whmi.org/what-we-do/bible-institute.html](http://www.whmi.org/what-we-do/bible-institute.html). More church-based efforts like <https://kabwatabaptistchurch.com/ministries/#1573709952677-1bd42cdf-a13f> and others like <https://cityofcityafrica.com/training>, <https://gospellife.org> are equally acutely needed.

<sup>9</sup> I am very confident that there are many local churches doing these apprenticeship programs with wonderfully encouraging results. It's just the case that we can never have too many of such.

selves to such labors to serve the church today and also to bequeath profitable instruction to the next generation of African believers if the Lord tarries.<sup>10</sup>

## Lifestyle Responses

Responding to contextual challenges effectively and in ways pleasing to the Lord will require walking “in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called” (Eph. 4:1).

### *Modeling Godliness with Contentment*

Something we are often tempted to underestimate is the far reaching power and transformative influence of a consistently godly example. The Bible doesn't do that. “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works” (Tit. 2:7). “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you . . . being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-4). Pastors on the African continent (as everywhere else) have the noble responsibility to show that a person does not have to dress and live like peddlers of the gospel to be content. In our use of social media, for example, and whatever else we do, we are to set an example of godliness with contentment (1 Tim. 6:3-10; Heb. 13:5-6). If we allow ourselves to be deluded by the lie that a lavish lifestyle is proof of God's blessing on someone's life and ministry then we are dancing to the tune of health/wealth teaching. However much we have or do not have we are blessed if we operate by the logic of the Psalmist: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, *that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations*” (Ps. 67:1-2). We must never forget that God's main aim in increasing our material and financial blessings is to enlarge our capacity to participate in see-

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<sup>10</sup> I have in mind here everything from standard scholarly publications to rich blog posts and didactic aids to facilitate the teaching of the Bible within the context of Africa. Again, I celebrate the labors of many on <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org>, <https://desiringgod.org>, <https://9marks.org>, personal sites like <https://rekindle.co.za>, and the many published works of many faithful African pastors and scholars. Several of the published works on the following site are authored by African scholars <https://langhamliterature.org/books?filter=allbooks&p=1>. Many contemporary and faithful African pastors have also written works that are serving not just the church in Africa but the global church as well. An example is [https://www.amazon.com/Conrad-Mbewe/e/B00NUBV7I0%3Fref=dbs\\_a\\_mng\\_rwt\\_scns\\_share](https://www.amazon.com/Conrad-Mbewe/e/B00NUBV7I0%3Fref=dbs_a_mng_rwt_scns_share). The work of up to seventy African theologians that brought forth the fruit of the first one-volume Africa Bible Commentary is very laudable. See here <https://www.amazon.com/Africa-Bible-Commentary>. My point is simply that there will always be more need for these various categories of written works.

ing the priceless blessing of the gospel go to the nations. Pastors have the unique privilege to be an embodiment of that to the churches they serve.

#### *Loving as Christ's Disciples Would and Should*

Few things are as stunning and riveting to the world around us as a local community of Christians that displays Christ. When believers in Jesus from all different tribal backgrounds, social statuses, and gender fellowship together, eagerly meeting each other's need, rejoicing with those who are rejoicing and weeping with those who are weeping, the world cannot ignore it (Acts 2:42-47; Rom. 12:15). When believers live and love in this way, they present the most tangible evidence to the world that Jesus came as sent by the Father and that the Father loves believers in Jesus as he loves Jesus (John 17:23; cf. Eph. 1:6). Local churches on the African continent have endless opportunities to show this and to demonstrate that the gospel is able to forge stronger familial bonds than any tribal origin can create.

#### *Care for the Vulnerable*

Most African churches tend to know some of the most vulnerable widows and orphans.<sup>11</sup> Think about what a powerful message would reverberate through the community if most local churches took James 1:27 seriously: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." The facts that much of this kind of tangible love cost money/resources and that most African churches tend to be just as poor as their communities are undeniable. But every local church is to do just as much as the Lord has prospered it (1 Cor. 16:2). "For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have" (2 Cor. 8:12).

#### *Cultural Transformation Initiatives*

These kinds of initiatives will obviously vary from place to place depending on the most readily apparent needs. Some localities will need educational institutions of various levels. Others will need healthcare facilities. Most places will need economic empowerment or efforts to mitigate and, if possible, even eradicate cultural practices that hinder or hurt human flourishing. Some others will need specialized services like trauma counseling in the midst of, or in the

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<sup>11</sup> Most developed countries have well developed, state-funded welfare systems and insurance schemes like life insurance policies. These "safety nets" make it so that the average widow or orphan is not as economically vulnerable in the west. This is obviously not the case in most of Africa making the church's ministry in this regard all the more needful and all the more relevant.

wake of, armed conflicts (which are tragically not rare). Whatever the specific realities in a given place may be, the church must continue to fulfill the vocation which her Lord gave her: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Paul’s way of saying it is to say, “They asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do” (Gal. 2:10). “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:9-10).

## **Responses Related to Partnerships**

Rediscovering and maximizing the opportunity to operate as “fellow workers for the truth” (3 John 8) is a pressing need in our response to today’s contextual challenges.

### *Networking Across the Continent*

The NT makes clear that we are better able to resist the devil and be firm in our faith if we know “that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Pet. 5:9). But it is very difficult to learn of what the Lord is doing with each other apart from intentional networking across the continent. There are certainly denominational affiliations like All Africa Baptist Fellowship<sup>12</sup> and they are a great blessing. But, again, this is another area in which the church will benefit more if there are many more gospel-driven, servant-hearted, cross-continental, and regional networks of likeminded brothers and sisters seeking to encourage each other in their particular station.

It is sad that, sometimes, Africans have to travel to the West to become aware of a great gospel work happening in another part of Africa. It is, however, a great encouragement to see brothers and sisters doing the needed hard work to create networking platforms such as TGC Africa<sup>13</sup> and Africa Baptist Theological Education Network (ABTEN)<sup>14</sup> which were created and are sustained in Africa. These organizations are primarily aimed at making the fruit of the spiritual gifts with which God has endowed the African church more broadly accessible on the continent. Praise be to God for that! May the Lord

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.aabfellowship.org>

<sup>13</sup> <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.abten.org>

grant more of such organizations to develop both in various regions of the continent and across the continent as a whole and may these be used of the Lord for the furtherance of his kingdom!

#### *Commending the Works of other Faithful Ministers*

This point could be subsumed under the one above but warrants a separate mention. What I have in mind here is urging pastors and church leaders across the continent to make the practice of putting before their churches, ministry contexts and other ministers the works of others serving faithfully in other parts of the continent and the world. It is a tragedy that the names most commonly known to average Christians in Africa are the likes of Joel Osteen, Paula White, Benny Hinn, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, TD Jakes, William Duncan, and others. I am aware that many of these names have access to television channels which they use in addition to social media platforms to market themselves. So, I am not suggesting that the church should get into a popularity contest with these individuals.

But there is a call here to not only refute their misleading claims but also to commend other brothers and sisters who are doing good work in various other places on the continent and around the world. Paul felt the need to do this. He said, speaking of a minister who was serving in another part of the world, “Epaphras [is] our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ” (Col. 1:7; cf. Phil. 2:19-24, 25, 4:3; 2 Pet. 3:15-16). There is no doubt that people will be blessed and helped to gain and live by a more global vision of the church and the Lord’s work if they are increasingly made aware of the great things God is doing in other places (cf. 1 Thess. 1:6-10). Such sensitization will increase the volume of praise, thanksgiving, and prayer rising to the Lord on behalf of fellow believers and churches (Col. 1:3-14). Also, those who may be tempted to think more highly of themselves will be reminded that the word of God did not originate with them and has not reached them alone (1 Cor. 14:36).

## **CONCLUDING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

In this concluding section I want to consider several questions that relate to local church ministry in the African context. Once again, I make no claim here that the questions I am raising are unique to the African context. Rather, I raise the questions from a recognition that certain theological principles are expressed differently in different cultures. So, the hope here is to seek to see if



there are certain aspects of local church ministry addressed in this volume that call for specific considerations in the context of Africa.

### **Is the Office of Elder a “Male Only” Office?**

In one sense, this is not a pressing question for the average local church in Africa. Pastors tend to be men and there doesn't seem to be a serious challenge against that.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the question is still very important to consider ultimately because the Bible addresses the matter clearly. Furthermore, in the last two decades or so, there has been a growing trend among African independent churches whereby the founding leader and his wife are identified together as “pastor,” “prophet,” or “apostle.” This leaves the average Christian wondering if there is any clear biblical teaching on the question of what men and women are instructed to do in the church.

Now on to the question: I believe the biblical answer to this question is a clear “Yes.” We read in 1 Timothy 2:11-14: “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” This text does not talk about the office of pastor, at least not directly, but it does talk about a fundamental aspect of the responsibilities of a pastor. Every pastor must be able to teach. And since the text instructs women not to teach or exercise authority over a man, we can safely conclude that God's will is that women shouldn't be ordained to the office of pastor.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A study on “Women's Religious Authority in a sub-Saharan Setting” [see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4801002/>] basically confirmed my growing up experience. This study, which was conducted in a Christian setting in Mozambique five years ago, put forward a number of conclusions on the subject of women in pastoral leadership in sub-Saharan Africa. One of these conclusions was that “sub-Saharan women's rise to religious leadership roles, as well as the limitations of this rise, reflects the broader societal realities and expectations of (in)equality between women and men. These “broader societal realities and expectations” tend to be that village chiefs, family heads, custodians of cultural artifacts, priests who preside over a tribe or village's sacred space, etc., are men. So, it is very easy for this kind of scenario to be reflected in the church. There is a call here for the church to heed the whole counsel of God; she must see to it that her members are thoroughly instructed on the roles of men and women in the ministry of the local church. If she allows herself to simply go along with what is culturally acceptable, then she is not being as faithful as she could be. Moreover, if the cultural tide turns against male-leadership at a future time and the church is caught unprepared, the results could be devastating to biblical fidelity and the health of the church.

<sup>16</sup> The interpretation of 1 Tim. 2:9-15 has been a subject of intense debate among believers for a long time. For a resource that looks at this debate from many different and helpful angles see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds. *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Tim. 2:9-15*, 3rd. ed. (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2016).

This is a text that many men in church leadership can use and, indeed, have used in abusive and subjugating ways towards women. That is a *tragedy* that both hurts the church's witness and dishonors the Lord Jesus Christ. As I mentioned above, many women in the African context have had very oppressive and abusive experiences under male leadership both in the home and the church. To this we can say two things: one, it is important to distinguish a selfish and sinful misuse of God's good gifts to us from the gifts themselves; two, the misuse, even extravagant misuse, of God's good gifts should not lead us to a rejection of the gifts.<sup>17</sup>

Almost everyone can think of a government that has (and sometimes successive governments in the same country that have) committed horrendous atrocities against its own people. But to go from there and argue that we should reject the whole idea of organized governments is not sound logic. So, instead of giving in to the recoil that we feel because of our experience with perversions of male leadership, we should seek to apply the character qualifications discussed earlier in this volume to the lives of prospective and current church leaders. We should ensure that we honor and submit to those who "rule well" and "labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17) and remove from leadership those who, by their sins, disqualify themselves from the noble office of pastor (1 Tim. 5:20).

What about the suggestion that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 was written because there were women at the church in Ephesus teaching false doctrines? All attempts to argue that this text speaks of a situation that was unique to Ephesus (in which women were not educated or were taught falsehoods) are simply unconvincing. The reasons that the apostle gives for the command transcend both culture and time. First, the man was created first and then the woman. And, second, the woman was deceived and not the man. Therefore, it is certainly the case that the command itself transcends culture and time. It is simply not convincing to provide a different reason for the command than is explicitly provided in the text and then go from the invented reason to argue that the command is not applicable to us today. We must bear in mind what a serious matter it is to attempt to explain away an explicit command of Scripture.

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<sup>17</sup> The experience of women with abusive husbands, church leaders and others is not an African phenomenon. It is a human phenomenon. Most interpreters of Genesis 3:16 agree that when God said that the man "shall rule over [the woman]" He was speaking of how the depravity of the male gender will work itself out especially in the context of the family. He meant that because of the calamity that had been unleashed in the fall of man, the male gender will use the good gift of leadership and headship which predates the fall in selfish and self-serving ways. So abusive male-leadership will be found wherever there are human beings.

What about extremely gifted female teachers? We can say a few things. In many cases, this question is asked from a genuine desire to see that a sister who is highly gifted as a teacher be a benefit to the church as she also grows in grace through the exercise of her gift of teaching. This is a good and noble desire. And, yet, we must say that a person's gifting does not determine the manner in which the gift is to be employed in ministry. Rather, we must look to God's word to know how the gifts are meant to function. So, if we ask the question, "How can a sister who is gifted to teach use her gift in ways that are both faith faithful and profitable?" Paul will answer, "Older women . . . are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled" (Tit. 2:3-5). This does not answer every question of practical application that could arise in a given context. But, if we start with a clear definition of God's prescription, then we have the tools to work through specific situations.

### **Can Women Be Deacons?**

Christians who affirm the authority of Scripture disagree on this question. The main text on this question is 1 Timothy 3:8-12 (but Rom. 16:1 and Acts 6 are also often discussed in relation to it). I am convinced that women can and should serve as deacons for three reasons. First, Paul introduces women into the discussion using the conjunction "likewise" (1 Tim. 3:11) showing he is still discussing the office of deacon but talking about a specific subgroup as it were. Second, there is significant overlap between the qualifications of the group discussed in verse 11 and the one discussed in verses 8, 9, 10 and 12. Third, it would be strange for Paul to have discussed the qualifications of the wives of deacons when he did not say anything about the qualifications of the wives of pastors. In fact, the apostles who were married (Matt. 8:14; Mark 1:29-31) traveled with their wives (1 Cor. 9:5), but nowhere do we read of qualifications that those women were required to fulfill. So, it seems best to take verse 11 as a reference to female deacons.

What about women serving as deacons in churches that are led by a single pastor and a deacon board? Often such churches have the deacons involved in a lot of oversight of the flock which is clearly an elder responsibility (1 Pet. 5:2). I confess that I served as a pastor in one such church. I just didn't have the privilege to attempt to lead the church away from this model. Other pastoral priorities were more pressing. But in such situations the sisters are essentially functioning as elders even though the church doesn't call them that. This

is why, depending on the needs of the congregation and other pastoral considerations, the church should: (1) delineate the roles of the two offices of elder and deacon as spelt out in the Bible; and (2) make sure that those called and qualified as pastors serve as pastors and those who are qualified as deacons serve as deacons. Obviously, much teaching and conversations in which various questions are answered and clarified have to be part of the process. The goal should never be to wear the badge of being a church that has elders and deacons but to build God's people up in the faith. So, the process must be fueled by love.

### **What Is a Good Process for Choosing Elders and Deacons in a Church?**

The New Testament (NT) presents situations in which a leader is appointing people to the office of elder (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5) and one in which the congregation is selecting the leaders (Acts 6:1-5; and, possibly, 1 Tim. 3). Neither of these is explicitly commanded as the only way. Conventional wisdom holds that people tend to be more comfortable and enthusiastic about following a leadership they were involved in appointing. So, having the congregation select the leaders may be a preferred approach for that reason. However, if the church is young, immature, and may be troubled by false teaching, it may be better, if possible, for a more mature minister to appoint those qualified to serve as elders and deacons. This is because issues of elections can tend to be extremely agitating especially to young and immature congregations.

### **Are There Apostles Today?**

As noted in the chapter on "The Biblical Offices of the Church," the term apostle is most frequently used in the NT to designate those who were specifically called and commissioned by Christ to undertake a critically foundational ministry that would help launch the church. A number of these apostles ended up writing books of the NT. No book was accepted as part of the NT if it did not come either from one of the apostles or from someone closely associated with an apostle. Apostles of that caliber do not exist today.

What are some biblical reasons to show that apostles of the category described above are not here today? The Bible says that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20 cf. Matt. 16:18; Rev. 21:14). This statement points to the foundational and once-for-all role that the apostles were commissioned to

fulfill. Also, God revealed the mystery of Christ “to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:5) in a way that was never before known to the sons of men in previous generations. In this way, these apostles were uniquely entrusted with the responsibility to pass on the good deposit of the gospel to new covenant believers of all times and cultures (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:1-2, 8; Jude 3; Heb. 2:3-4). With that role fulfilled, the ongoing function of the office in the church is no longer necessary. In fact, the only one of these apostles who did not walk and talk with Jesus during Jesus’ earthly life said of himself, “last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (1 Cor. 15:8). Paul indicates in this verse that he did not expect other apostles like himself to arise after him.

This is a particularly important teaching for believers and the church in Africa because there are countless indigenous churches in almost every country on the continent often founded by nationals. Some of these people refer to themselves as apostles. Usually there is no effort made to help people understand what they mean by referring to themselves as apostles. In many cases, it seems to be the case that the title is meant to communicate the idea that they are spiritually superior to pastors and have special powers to do signs and wonders and miracles. But there is no biblical basis for anyone today to claim that they are an apostle as Paul, James, or Peter were apostles. It is best to avoid using the title for the sake of avoiding confusion. But if someone or a denomination decides to use the title today, they ought to labor hard to ensure that they are not communicating an unbiblical message by their use of the title.

### **Are There Prophets and Prophecies Today?**

Prophecy as discussed in 1 Corinthians refers to communicating revelation that is spontaneously given by God (1 Cor. 14:29-32). A prophet would then be someone who has had a track record of receiving and communicating such revelations that have proven to be true.

The question of whether prophets/prophecies are for today could sound ridiculous to many sincere professors of the Christian faith in Africa today. There is so much available to absorb from the news and social media about what the latest prophets and prophecies have to say. We have prophets who “prophesy” about everything from the results of football matches to the fact that a husband and wife know each other sexually. So, for many the presence of prophets and prophecies today is a foregone conclusion.

But, for Christians who want to ground explicitly all the aspects of their lives in the Bible, this question can become very complicated and difficult. In

one sense, it seems the NT is clear that prophets (like apostles of the likes of Peter, James, John, and Paul) are not here today. This case can be compellingly made from Ephesians 2:20 where the building of the foundation of the church is attributed to the apostles and prophets (cf. Eph. 3:5). Thus, one could argue that since the foundational work is complete, it follows that prophets, like apostles, are no longer here today.<sup>18</sup> Things get complicated, however, when one considers that in writing to the Corinthians, Paul states that it is when the perfect comes, that is, when Christ returns, that prophecies and tongues will pass away (1 Cor. 13:8-10). Furthermore, he explicitly commands believers to “earnestly desire. . . especially that you may prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:1). He urges the Thessalonians to “not despise prophecies” (1 Thess. 5:20) and instructs those with the gift of prophecy to “prophesy, in proportion to our faith” (Rom. 12:7). These are NT commands that do not seem to be rescinded anywhere. So, it seems inadequate to say without qualification that prophets and prophecies have ceased based on Ephesians 2:20.

How can we then put Ephesians and 1 Corinthians together on this subject? First, I do not regard any prophets or prophecies of today as on par with the Ephesians 2:20 type of prophecies. Just as many would comfortably use the expression “small-a apostles” to refer to individuals who may have had a uniquely successful missionary or church planting ministry, I would say the prophets of today are “small-p prophets.” What I mean by this is that the prophets we have today will not be people saying things that are adding to or, much less, subtracting from the foundation of the church that has been once-for-all laid (Eph. 2:20 and 3:5). Rather, a prophet today will be an individual who receives a spontaneous revelation from the Lord that is then communicated for the “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” of an individual or a particular congregation that already unswervingly holds to the all-sufficient word of God, the Bible. I make this distinction because I recognize that “in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:2).

We have the definitive word of God for all people of all geographical locations and times in the Scriptures. But the Lord can give a spontaneous revelation in a place and time about an individual or church that is immediately applicable to them and not necessarily to every Christian everywhere. To state the obvious, the recipients of utterances of such revelations have the responsibility to evaluate

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<sup>18</sup> Bible-believing Christians and ministers who believe that prophecies have ceased make other arguments to support their position besides Eph. 2:20 and 3:5. See for example Thomas R. Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2018), 155-169. I have not found this view’s explanation of 1 Cor. 13:8-12 persuasive.

what they are told in light of the Scriptures to make sure it is not out of step in any way with any portion of the final, inerrant and authoritative word of God.

Another point on the matter of prophets/prophecy, especially for many in the context of Africa, is the criterion for discerning whether a prophet is true or false. This criterion is given us in Deuteronomy 18:20-22 where we read:

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.' And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'— when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

This criterion is both very important and inadequate. It is very important because it is rooted in the very nature and character of God. The reason we know that a prophet who speaks things that never come to pass is not from God is because the Living and True God “is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind” (Num. 23:19). He is the “God who never lies” (Tit. 1:2). But this test is also inadequate because not every prophet who says something that does come to pass submits to the explicit teaching of God’s revealed word.

Moses warned that, “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams” (Deut. 13:1-3). Notice that Moses speaks here of a prophet who communicates a sign or wonder that actually comes to pass. But the same prophet later turns around and invites those who saw the fulfillment of the revelation to act against God’s written word. God’s people are instructed to reject such a prophet.

It is very important to remember that, for God’s people, spiritual phenomena are never self-validating; only the objective word of God is. So, a prophet who proclaims a revelation that comes to pass but later seeks to lead people to disobey what the Bible clearly teaches is to be utterly shunned. The point here is that the fulfillment of the prophecy is an important but inadequate test. The second test which is equally critical is that the overall theology of the prophet must be true to the revealed will of the God as we have it in the Bible. Jesus famously taught

that, ‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (Matt. 7:21-23).

So, any believer and especially gospel minister who lives in a place where people are greatly influenced by a famous prophet whose prophecies have even come to pass but who is teaching/practicing things contrary to the Bible, has the biblical mandate to call God’s people to regard such as a false prophet. He is to do so by showing from the Bible how the prophet’s teaching contradicts God’s revealed word. Paul warned churches and even called some of the false teachers of his day by name (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18). So, we must never forget that “such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So, it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds” (2 Cor. 11:13-14). The mysterious providences of God include the fact that he can allow a false prophet to speak things that actually come to pass. But thanks be to God for the gift of His infallible word by which we can and should assess every person’s teaching and not just rely on what they said.

Before leaving the question of prophecy, we should briefly ask why God even allows false prophets to arise. The Bible teaches that one reason that God allows them to arise is to test his people. Deuteronomy 13 teaches that the reason a prophet can arise and give a sign that comes to pass and later invite God’s people to worship false gods is that “the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 13:3). The call for God’s people, as we have it in Deuteronomy 13:4-5, is:

You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.



The church and believers today, of course, do not have the authority from God to put people to death. Such authority is given to the government (Rom. 13:1-4). If such a prophet is a member of a church and is unwilling to repent for misleading God's people, he is to be excommunicated and treated as an unbeliever (1 Cor. 5:11; Rom. 16:17-18; Tit. 3:10-11).<sup>19</sup> If he is on TV or social media, believers are to avoid following his teaching and to make sure they do not give his evil enterprise any kind of support whatsoever. Any support is a participation in his wickedness (cf. 2 John 10-11).<sup>20</sup>

A second reason God allows the rise of false prophets is judgmental. He raises up such false prophets as a judgment on those who have set up idols in their hearts and are hypocritically pretending to inquire of the Lord (Ezek. 7:26-27; 14:4-5, 9-11). In 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 (see also Matt. 24:24), we learn that God will bring this version of his judgment to final completion when the lawless one comes ...

... by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

But those who belong to the Lord are exhorted "not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter" (2 Thess. 2:2). Indeed, "Let no one deceive you in any way" (2 Thess. 2:3). Rather, believers are to wait for the revelation of God's Son from heaven who will give them relief and destroy all evil including the man of lawlessness and Satan himself who inspires all false prophets (1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Thess. 1:7-10).

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<sup>19</sup> First Corinthians 5 teaches that the sins for which Israel was instructed to administer the death penalty on perpetrators are now dealt with by the church through church discipline. In many cases (such as the sin of murder), the church must call in civil authorities to punish the wrong doer as God has assigned these authorities to do (1 Pet. 2:14; Rom. 13:4).

<sup>20</sup> I should note here that there is a range of error on TV and social media. There are some who are genuine believers and are in error on some parts of their teaching. There are others who are just wolves in sheep clothing. Discerning who is who can be difficult. This is why every believer (as much as God makes possible) should be a member at a church where Christ's word is preached and His name is honored so that they can seek counsel and direction from their pastors and more mature members in the church.

## Is Corrective Church Discipline Applicable in Africa?<sup>21</sup>

It is true that various social forces can make people fearful of the pressure and sometimes ostracism that often result from speaking the truth about an unrepentant church member. For some people it has been a painful real-life experience. But there is a more powerful reality: the gospel is able to embolden people and make them embrace and live by the truth that “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37).<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the Bible clearly teaches that the sins that necessitate the grace of church discipline are not regional matters. The fact that a local church could end up with people in membership who seemed to be truly saved and were baptized and brought into membership but who were indeed not saved (Matt. 13:20-22; 2 Tim. 4:10; Acts 1:16-20) has nothing to do with where the church is located.

Also, the tragedy of church leaders who end up as wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt. 7:15), servants of Satan disguising as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:13), can be experienced by any local church regardless of where and when it exists. No particular place in the world precludes the fact that a true servant of Christ can become snared in sin from which they can only be rescued by the grace that comes through church discipline (Matt. 18:10-14; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 2 Tim. 2:24-26; James 5:19-20). These situations and more will occur and recur wherever we find local churches, including Africa, of course. And a neglect of church discipline for any reason will gravely compromise the purity of the church (Rev. 2:20; 1 Cor. 5:6).

What then must churches do? First, a local church must cultivate itself, under Christ and by the gospel, into a community that is abounding in love toward one another. Put another way, every local church must strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This kind of community sharpens the effectiveness of corrective church discipline in that a person

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<sup>21</sup> People often, helpfully, distinguish between formative and corrective church discipline. The former happens through the various teachings, corrections, admonitions, etc., that church members receive. The latter is applied when a member unrepentantly persists in sin.

<sup>22</sup> The communal nature of African societies is deeply rooted in family and tribal allegiances. This drives the politics of nations. Quite often it is the case that a certain person running for office is automatically the right candidate not so much because of their policies but because they speak the same native language with someone else. Also, once a certain individual from a certain part of the country is in a high public office, it is expected that people with a certain last name are automatically qualified for appointments to posts of responsibility regardless of their training and skill. Tragically, sometimes bloody conflicts run along the same bloodlines. So that one person’s last name automatically makes them either an ally or an enemy. All this is what the Bible calls favoritism and like every sin, it is not unique to Africa. But tribal allegiances have a particular strength in Africa.

excommunicated from such a church community forfeits real gospel and soul-nourishing fellowship. Exclusion from a church community marked by the warmth of rich gospel fellowship allows the biting cold of being delivered to Satan to have its full effect on the one who is excluded (1 Cor. 5:11). It goes without saying that there isn't much to be missed when excluded from a church community that is marked by rank ungodliness and the biting and devouring of one another. Next, in the event that a member of the church recalcitrantly goes on in sin such a member must be removed from membership after all the biblical steps appropriate to the case have been followed.

Finally, the pastor of a church that has never practiced church discipline must lead the church to start applying that grace when the next occasion for its use presents itself. If a church capitulates to the temptation to avoid hard conversations and difficult but biblically commanded steps of obedience, then they will never make progress toward greater biblical fidelity (at least not in the area of church discipline). But if, instead, the church says, "We will do all of what we see in God's word no matter where it takes us," they will be able to see God use the grace of corrective church discipline in ways no one could predict or pre-arrange. Quite often, God uses church discipline to cultivate deeper awe and reverence for His Name and person in the church (Acts 5:11; 1 Tim. 5:20).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has suggested some responses to the challenges discussed in the previous chapter. We have also considered some questions of practical significance in church ministry. Both the responses and questions are discussed with a recognition that many other possible questions and details have not been dealt with here. But, hopefully, what is raised here can contribute in some way to helping people be strengthened in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Like our Lord, may our heartbeat be, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4).

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## CHAPTER 6

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### BIBLICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF HEALTHY CHURCHES<sup>1</sup>

- Coye Still -

Is your church healthy? How can we know whether our churches are healthy or not? Clarifying the church's purpose is a helpful place to start in defining what a healthy church is. We know that the church exists as an accomplishment of Christ's saving work on the cross (Eph. 2:11-22) and for the ultimate purpose of God's glory: "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:20-21).<sup>2</sup> This insight into the church's purpose suggests that, to be healthy, a church needs to embrace and fulfill its purpose of glorifying God.<sup>3</sup> A healthy church will be working properly in its various parts and growing toward maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:11-16), all for God's glory.

What things would we expect to be characteristic of a healthy church that is glorifying God? I will focus on twelve biblical characteristics in this chapter.<sup>4</sup> These are certainly not the only biblical characteristics of a healthy church.<sup>5</sup> They are, however, twelve important ones. Each characteristic presents itself to us as both a responsibility and a gift. It is a gift because it comes from God,

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the International Mission Board (IMB) published a document entitled *Foundations* ([www.imb.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/IMB-FOUNDATIONS\\_MAG-English-v1.2.pdf](http://www.imb.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/IMB-FOUNDATIONS_MAG-English-v1.2.pdf)) in which "12 Characteristics of Healthy Churches" are listed with brief explanations on pages 61 - 64. I have used this list as an outline for the present chapter. That is, the list has supplied the section headings. The introduction to the chapter and the expositions of the characteristics are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Conrad Mbeve, *God's Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2020, digital edition), chapter 1, comments that "the grand purpose of the church . . . is to bring glory to God through the realization of the redemption that Christ bought on the cross of Calvary."

<sup>3</sup> I am not saying that "to glorify God" is the only statement to be made about the church's purpose. I am simply saying that it is important and, indeed, essential to a biblical statement of the church's purpose.

<sup>4</sup> *Foundations*, pages 61 - 64.

<sup>5</sup> Other characteristics might include, for example, faith, hope, love, holiness, Christlikeness, unity, and endurance through suffering. Most of these qualities (and some others) will come into the picture in our discussions in this chapter. I am not deemphasizing the importance of such precious signs of God's gracious work as I emphasize the twelve characteristics listed in this chapter. I am simply calling attention to a select group of important biblical characteristics of healthy churches.

as does any true growth in it. It is a responsibility because we are to embrace it, establish it, and devote ourselves to make progress in it. A church that is growing in these characteristics is likely to be making progress in glorifying God in the strength that he supplies.

Perhaps you would pause now and pray for God to guide and empower your church in glorifying him. As you continue reading, you might ask yourself to what extent each biblical characteristic describes your church and how your church could make progress in it. As you do this, it will be important for you to be alert for two potential pitfalls. One is pride if your church seems to be excelling in the biblical characteristics. The other is discouragement if your church seems far from the mark with multiple, or even most, of the characteristics. Rather than succumbing to these temptations, let's be humbly grateful toward and confident in God. If your church has strengths, you can be humbly grateful to God that these strengths are gifts from him. If your church is sorely lacking in health, you can take heart. He who has begun a good work in you and the church will bring it to completion. In fact, he is at work now in your consideration of these characteristics, beginning with biblical worship.

## **BIBLICAL WORSHIP**

Jesus said, "The hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him" (John 4:23). God intends for our churches to be assemblies of true worshipers indwelt and enabled by the Spirit (Eph. 2:22) and committed to the truth that is in Christ (John 14:6).

What are we to do when we gather for worship? How are we to glorify God together in worship? The New Testament emphasizes several things, including the public reading of Scripture and preaching and teaching,<sup>6</sup> prayer,<sup>7</sup> the ordinances,<sup>8</sup> giving,<sup>9</sup> and, singing.<sup>10</sup> All these are integral aspects of biblical worship. Of course, worship will look and sound differently in different contexts, but these basic elements will be consistently included.

Also, worship that glorifies God will both exalt him and edify his people. Paul's instructions on singing in Ephesians 5:18-21 provide insight into worship's complementary purposes of exaltation and edification: "... be filled with

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2; Acts 2:42.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Tim. 2:1, 8-9; Acts 2:42.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 2:41-42; 1 Cor. 11:17-24.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 16:1-2; Matt. 5:23-24.

<sup>10</sup> Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16.

the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” We see in these verses that singing in worship is for “making melody to the Lord with our hearts, giving thanks to God.” That is, we sing to exalt the Lord in thanksgiving and praise. Singing is also for “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs . . . submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” That is, we speak to and hear from one another in our singing. We confess and declare the truths of the faith to one another in song. We teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16). So, our singing in worship is both unto the Lord and to one another simultaneously.

The same can be said of worship’s other components—they are directed both upwardly to God and outwardly to his people. The public reading of Scripture honors the Lord and helps the hearers. This applies whether a Bible passage more directly addresses the Lord (in praise, confession, petition, and so on) or people (in story, proposition, instruction, exhortation and so on) or both alternately. In each case, it both honors God and enriches his people.<sup>11</sup> We also see this vertical and horizontal dynamic in biblical preaching. It exalts the Lord while instructing and inspiring the hearers. Likewise, corporate prayer is for speaking to God in faith and has the effect of strengthening and encouraging those who share in it, even when they do so in silence. Giving in worship can both express devotion to the Lord and influence his people toward the cheerful giving that he loves. So, our worship gatherings are for praise (Rom. 15:6) and encouragement (Heb. 10:24-25). They are for ministry to the Lord and ministry to one another.

It may come as no surprise that biblical worship is closely related to the other characteristics in this chapter. For example, preaching and teaching will often, though not exclusively, take place in the worship setting. This is rather obvious. With some characteristics, though, the relationship to worship may be less obvious. For example, there is a close, if not immediately visible, connection between biblical worship and biblical mission, the twelfth characteristic that we will discuss. The connection lies in God’s commitment to receive the worship of his ransomed people from among all the nations and tribes of the earth (Rev. 5:13; 7:9-10). As David declared, “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, all the families of the nations shall worship before you” (Psa.

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<sup>11</sup> Take Psalm 138:8 as an example: “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.” Reading this verse publicly in worship honors God and is an appeal to him. Additionally, reading it is a declaration to God’s people of a profound truth about him and encourages them to appeal to him based on his love, his good purpose, and his capacity to accomplish his purpose. So, the reading will exalt the Lord and edify his people.

22:27). In biblical mission we proclaim Christ to the nations in order to call the lost unto salvation and unto true worship of the God who saves. In fact, it has been said that “missions exists because worship doesn’t.”<sup>12</sup> God is seeking true worshippers (John 4:23) and missions is, in a sense, joining with God in seeking from among the nations those who will hear the good news, turn to the Lord, and worship him.

## BIBLICAL PREACHING AND TEACHING

Preaching and teaching are of utmost importance for the local church and in the ministry of the pastor. Jesus himself made preaching and teaching a high priority. “He went throughout all Galilee, preaching ...” (Mark 1:39). “He went about among the villages teaching” (Mark 6:6). He said, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God ... for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 3:15). The apostles followed in the steps of Jesus and devoted themselves to “the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Paul said that Christ had sent him “to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17), and he had no higher priority than doing so.

The importance of preaching and teaching comes further into focus in Paul’s instructions to Timothy. Paul encouraged this son in the ministry to “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13), to “do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15), and to “preach the word in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4:2).

“Rightly handling the word of truth” involves demonstrating the centrality of Christ as we preach and teach from the Scriptures. Jesus taught that the Old Testament progresses toward and points to him (John 5:39; Luke 24:45-48). The New Testament shines the light of Christ brightly, so that we may see him and his redemptive work clearly. “All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation,”<sup>13</sup> The Apostle Paul understood this clearly and wrote, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28). Proclaiming Christ faithfully from the Scriptures will lead to our church members growing toward maturity in him.

We should have no misconceptions about the hard work that is necessary for faithful preaching. Paul wrote of “those who *labor* in preaching and teach-

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<sup>12</sup> John Piper preached a sermon entitled “Missions Exists Because Worship Doesn’t: A Bethlehem Legacy, Inherited and Bequeathed,” in October 2012. He has also made this statement in books and articles.

<sup>13</sup> The Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article I: The Scriptures. See [www.bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/](http://www.bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/)

ing” (1 Tim. 5:17, italics mine). There are no substitutes for time and diligent effort in preparation to preach.<sup>14</sup> Knowing the Bible thoroughly is crucial if we are to teach sound doctrine; focused study, careful thought, and prayer are essential if we are to preach and teach well. Likewise, experience in actual preaching is essential. To grow as preachers, we need to preach regularly, and we must do so with an aim of making progress in skill and effectiveness. Most skilled craftsmen in the ministry of the word have preached and taught often, reflected carefully on how to improve their efforts, and closely observed others who are capable preachers. In other words, effective biblical preaching and teaching is usually the fruit of years of sustained and purposeful effort.

On the other hand, we should not make the mistake of thinking that true preaching is the product of mere human effort or skill. Preaching has a way of humbling men of good character, even men who work hard at it. It may not humble the mere “peddlers of God’s word” whose purpose is personal gain. But it will almost certainly humble men who know that they are ambassadors speaking on behalf of Christ as the aroma of death to some and the aroma of glorious life to others. Such men will feel the weight of their responsibility and ask, “Who is sufficient for such things?” (2 Cor. 2:16). Paul knew well that he was not sufficient in himself. Neither are we, and we are not to labor in our own strength. “Our sufficiency is from God” (2 Cor. 3:5). We can trust God to give his help by his Spirit both in the study and in the pulpit so that we may toil and struggle and prevail in the glorious work “with all his energy that he powerfully works within [us]” (Col. 1:29).

God’s people and the lost stand in need of God’s word. Proclaiming it for the hearer’s good and for God’s glory is at the heart of the church’s mission and the pastor’s responsibility.

## **BIBLICAL PRAYER**

God intends for his people to pray (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-13; 1 Tim. 2:1) and we have good reason to believe that biblical prayer can flourish in all churches because God has given us all that we need to be people of true prayer. He has adopted us as sons and daughters in Christ, so that we approach him in prayer as our loving Father. He has given his Spirit to guide us in praying and to intercede according to the will of God on our behalf. He has given us precious promises in his word to

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<sup>14</sup> A preacher’s circumstances will, of course, have a bearing on the amount of time that he can spend in preparation. For example, is he a full-time pastor, bi-vocational, etc.? The principle to follow, however, is that if his responsibilities include preaching and teaching, then study and preparation should be a high priority as he allocates time to his ministry duties.



assure us that he hears and answers prayer. He has given us examples in the Scriptures of praying men and women so that we can learn from them.

Pastors and leaders have an important role in modeling biblical prayer for the church. It would be highly unusual for a church to thrive in prayer when her pastor and leaders are neglectful in it. I am not saying that the pastor must be present, presiding, and directly leading in prayer during every service, every prayer meeting, every Bible study, every family celebration and so on. The saints are to be equipped for and function in ministry themselves. I am saying that it is important for the pastor to be a person of genuine, faithful, biblical prayer. When the pastor is leading prayer, let him do so as a man who is familiar with and well known at the throne of grace and who takes the congregation with him to speak with the One who sits upon it.

God is glorified when the church recognizes her dependence on him and expresses it in prayer. He is glorified when he answers our prayers. To God be the glory in our praying!

## BIBLICAL GIVING

God has given generously to us in creation, in redemption, and in daily provision. If we are his faithful children, we will imitate him in our own giving. Jesus said that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Generosity is a mark of spiritual health in a Christian. Likewise, a mark of health in a church is that its members are giving faithfully and generously.

Though Christians in Africa tend to be generous people, some of our churches have much progress to make in giving support for their ministries and ministers. This is understandable, in part, because early missionary methods in Africa sometimes unintentionally gave the impression that giving by Africans through the local church did not need to be a priority.<sup>15</sup> Missionaries received their support from abroad. A missionary who served as a church’s first pastor perhaps had no need of and did not receive a salary from the church. African church planters and pastors, as well as regional Bible schools, may also have been supported through the mission with funds from abroad. Church members could easily get the impression from all this that they had little responsibility for supporting a pastor<sup>16</sup> and funding ministry in the local community and beyond. Such a history has had a limiting influence on giving

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<sup>15</sup> Mbewe, Chapter 10, acknowledges this also.

<sup>16</sup> On support for ministers, see 1 Cor. 9:13-14; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; and 2 Tim. 2:3-6.

for many churches. It does not need to dictate the future. The trajectory of a church's giving can change.

Whatever a church's history of giving may be and whether her members tend to be poor or wealthy, the generous giving that God intends is within reach for all. It was within reach for a poor widow whose small coins were counted by Jesus as more than the large sums of the rich (Mark 12:41-44). It was within reach for the churches of Macedonia, though they were in extreme poverty (2 Cor. 8:1-7). Generous giving is within reach today for Christians with little income. It is also within reach for wealthier Christians who have not previously given generously through their local church. There is no lack with God; no lack of wisdom; no lack of wealth. All things come from him and of his own we give to him (1 Chron. 29:14). Cheerful and generous givers find that God increases their capacity to give (2 Cor. 9:6-11). If we desire to be faithful, he will enable us and guide us to give what he intends for us to give.

God's guidance comes to the church, in part, through the teaching and example of pastors and elders. Pastors can teach systematic and proportionate giving (1 Cor. 16:2) and encourage both new and long-time members in it.<sup>17</sup> Pastors can unpretentiously and winsomely exemplify generous giving personally. They also can be patient with the people and content with what God provides, even when the church's progress in giving seems slow.

Another, and quite important, thing that pastors can do is lead the church to manage members' gifts with integrity and accountability. We are to aim not only at what is honorable in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man (2 Cor. 8:21). To ensure proper and blameless handling of gifts, good leaders will involve multiple trustworthy people in accounting for and applying funds. Generous giving will depend, in part, on the people's confidence that their gifts are handled responsibly. May our giving and our stewardship of gifts that the church receives glorify God in every way.

## **BIBLICAL ORDINANCES**

Jesus commanded us to baptize disciples (Matt. 28:18-20) and to observe the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Because Jesus has instructed or, we could say,

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<sup>17</sup> There are various views on the question of whether tithing is a Christian obligation under the New Covenant. Conrad Mbewe, Chapter 10, gives reasons that he thinks "there is a good case to be made that tithing is the main way in which God expects his church to raise its money." At the very least, 1 Cor. 16:2 is biblical precedent for systematic and proportional giving by Christians in cooperation with their local church.

ordered these practices, we refer to them as ordinances of the church.<sup>18</sup> In observing them, we express obedience to Christ and visually proclaim the gospel message.

Baptism declares that a believer in Christ belongs to God, for it is “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Baptism also affirms the credibility of the believer’s testimony, for in administering it, the church acknowledges that the believer has been called out of the dominion of darkness and is now in the kingdom of the Son.

I have referred to the recipients of baptism as believers because I am convinced that believer’s baptism is most consistent with what we find in the New Testament. For the same reason, I am also convinced that baptism is, properly, to be an act of immersion in water. In fact, I believe that “baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>19</sup> I will share a few of the reasons that I am convinced of this.

First, the New Testament accounts of water baptism indicate that the recipients had received and believed the gospel message when they were baptized. This pattern of receiving the message of Christ in repentance and faith and then being baptized is evident at Pentecost (Acts 2:41), in Samaria (Acts 8:12), with the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:38), in the experience of Saul (Acts 9:1-19; 22:12-16), in the home of Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48),<sup>20</sup> in Philippi (Acts 16:14-15, 31-34), in Corinth (Acts 18:4-8), and in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-5). On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached Christ crucified and risen and instructed hearers who were “cut to the heart” to “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). The order of events was to receive the word and then be baptized (Acts 2:41). Consistently with what we see in the book of Acts, baptism is linked closely with faith in Colossians 2:11-12 as well: “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” It seems reasonable to say that baptism of believers is the New Testament pattern.

Second, the Greek word *baptizō*, which is transliterated in our English New Testaments as “baptize,” consistently carried the idea of total submer-

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<sup>18</sup> In some church traditions, the ordinances are referred to as sacraments.

<sup>19</sup> The Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article VII.

<sup>20</sup> Some commentators have suggested that the household baptisms of Acts 10 and 16 (and 1 Cor. 1:16) would have included infants of parents who were responding to the gospel. There seems, however, to be an emphasis in the narratives on household members receiving the word and then being baptized (see Acts 10:44; 16:32; also, 18:8). The fact that all household members hearing and responding to the word is not explicit in the case of Lydia’s household (Acts 16:15) is not evidence for infant baptism. It is more likely that Acts 16:15 is to be understood in the light of the other household passages and the larger pattern in Acts. See John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 350.

sion.<sup>21</sup> In other words, to say, “*baptizing* them in the name,” is to say, “*immersing* them in the name.” In fact, figurative uses of *baptizō* and *baptisma* (or baptism) draw their force from the idea of immersion. For example, Jesus asked James and John, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38). Jesus was to be immersed in suffering, that is, he would be baptized in a baptism of suffering.

Third, as a symbol of sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom. 6:1-10), immersion baptism is most fitting. The immersion in water portrays death and burial in union with Christ. Reemergence from the water portrays union with Christ in his resurrection. Indeed, immersion baptism speaks a powerful message to the believer: “You are united with Christ in his death. You have died to sin and can no longer walk in it. You are raised to new life and will be resurrected when Christ returns. Now, live for Christ in keeping with your baptism.”

Finally, as a sign of inclusion in the New Covenant, baptism is rightly administered to believers who have experienced the new birth by the work of the Spirit through faith.<sup>22</sup> Circumcision was the sign of inclusion in the Old Covenant. It was administered to the sons of Israelite parents, the biological descendants of Abraham. There is an analogous relationship between circumcision as the sign of inclusion in the Old Covenant and baptism as the sign of inclusion in the New Covenant. Some theologians view the analogy as properly extending to infant baptism of the children of Christian parents. This view fails, however, to sufficiently respect the important difference between circumcision and baptism as covenant signs.

Entry into the New Covenant is not by physical birth at all but by the work of the Holy Spirit. The New Covenant has to do with the heart (Jer. 31:31-34); with the Spirit of God renewing the heart and indwelling the believer (Ezek. 36:25-27; 2 Cor 3:3-6; John 3:5-6, 16). Entry into the New Covenant is of God and through believing in Christ, not natural birth or human parentage: “to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13); and “it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God” (Rom. 9:8). Rather, “it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7). This being the case, the sign of inclusion in the New Covenant is properly administered to believers in Christ who have been renewed, that is, who are “regenerate,” by the work of the Spirit, not to infants.

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<sup>21</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 226.

<sup>22</sup> John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Broadman and Holman: Nashville, 2013), 171 – 173.

For these reasons, I believe that baptism in the New Testament church was the immersion of a believer in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and that this is the present-day practice that is most faithful to the biblical revelation. Of course, variations from the New Testament practice developed through church history for a range of reasons. Most Christians in our generation may think of baptism in accord with whatever customs are familiar to them. That is, they think of either infants or professing believers being either sprinkled or immersed based on what they have most often seen in their own churches. This situation and an awareness that baptism is not of highest importance doctrinally call for charity, sensitivity, and respect in discussions of the matter. While it is right to make the biblical case for baptism of believers by immersion and encourage all to search the Scriptures regarding this matter, it is also right to work together in joint worship and ministry efforts with those who have differing convictions regarding baptism, but with whom there is strong agreement on the core doctrines of the faith.

In addition to baptism, the Lord's Supper is an ordinance of the church. It is a regular remembrance of Christ's once and for all sacrifice for our salvation.<sup>23</sup> Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24-25), so the idea of remembering is central to the Lord's Supper. It is "a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming."<sup>24</sup> We look both back and forward in the Supper. Remembering both his death and his promise to return, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). We proclaim that Jesus died for us and that his death has not been in vain, for in it he has purchased us to be a unified people for himself for all eternity. He will come again to complete the work of redemption in us. The church rejoices in declaration of these great truths as it shares the Lord's Supper together.

The church also expresses exclusive spiritual loyalty to Jesus Christ in the Supper. The Apostle Paul helps us to see this. He wrote that "what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" (1 Cor. 10:20-22). It would be an offense and insult to Christ for us to receive the Lord's Supper and participate in offerings or sacrifices to other gods or spiritual

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<sup>23</sup> On the "once and for all" nature of Christ's sacrifice, see Heb. 9:25-28; 10:10-14. Therefore, the Lord's Supper is a remembrance, not a repetition, of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

<sup>24</sup> Baptist Faith and Message, Article VII.

powers, including the spirits of ancestors. Our loyalty is to Christ and him alone. He died to redeem us. He rules now as Lord and will come again for his own. He is worthy of our full devotion and will not share it.

The ordinances as visual portrayals of the gospel are precious gifts from the Lord to believers and the church. Faithful pastors and leaders will be diligent and timely in administering them so that individual Christians and the church can be obedient, strengthened in faith, and encouraged to walk with Christ confidently.

## **BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP**

In chapter two, Dr. Ndzi addressed the Scriptural officers of the local church and discussed the qualifications for these offices. Therefore, I will make only two brief observations here that are in keeping with the focus of the present chapter.

First, biblical leadership is of great importance for church health. Local churches thrive when they have good and godly leaders. Pastors and deacons have high callings that they are to fulfill with their best energies and with dependence on the strength and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Their faithful service will be a great contribution to their churches' health.

Second, the good service of faithful and diligent leaders will not go unrewarded. "Those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves" (1 Tim. 3:13). Elders who lead well, especially those who are diligent and faithful in preaching and teaching, are to be "considered worthy of double honor" (1 Tim. 5:13). Beyond any temporal honor, faithful leaders look forward to more precious rewards when Christ returns. To pastors who serve in a way pleasing to the Lord, Peter wrote, "When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet. 5:4). We will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give account for what we have done in the body (2 Cor. 5:10). Let us serve in such a way now that we may then hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21, 23).

## **BIBLICAL MEMBERSHIP**

It is helpful to think of church membership in terms of both the universal church and the local church. The church universal "includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation."<sup>25</sup> In other words, all true believers in Christ who have been purchased

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<sup>25</sup> Baptist Faith and Message 2000, "VI. The Church."

by his sacrifice and born anew by his Spirit are members of his church. God knows, quite perfectly, who the members of the universal church are (2 Tim. 2:19). Local church membership is to be a small-scale reflection of the universal church. In other words, local churches are to include people who have been redeemed by Christ and renewed by the Spirit.

Theologically, we refer to this as the local church having a regenerate membership. Members are regenerate in that they have experienced the new birth by the Holy Spirit as believers in Christ. This is consistent with the descriptions that we have of the New Testament churches. Of the Jerusalem church, it is said that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Paul addressed the church in Corinth as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2). These are descriptions of regenerate believers in Christ, sharers in redemption, who were included in local churches.

Practically speaking, this means that a local church’s membership is to include people who have responded to the gospel in repentance toward God and faith in Christ, given credible testimony or confession of faith, and received baptism. In receiving a member into the local fellowship, the church is acknowledging that this person is a fellow traveler on the road to heaven, a genuine believer in Christ. This church should be able to say of her members who are in good standing, “We believe on good grounds that these are true Christians and sharers in eternal life.” Admittedly, the church’s knowledge of a person’s standing with God is not perfect. A church may receive someone into its fellowship in good conscience and later recognize that he or she is not living as a Christian at all. In this case, the church is to try to bring the wanderer back and, in a manner of speaking, to “save his soul from death” (James 5:19). Appropriate care in receiving members is, nonetheless, of great importance and is likely to save the church from practicing church discipline more often than would have been necessary otherwise.

In addition to regenerate church membership, the New Testament bears witness to a membership that has identifiable boundaries. Paul counseled the Colossians to “walk in wisdom toward outsiders” (Col. 4:5). Such a statement requires an understanding that there are insiders and outsiders. This is also in view in Paul’s comments regarding the need for church discipline in Corinth. He says that the church has no responsibility for judging “outsiders,” but definite responsibility in regard to “those inside the church” (1 Cor. 5:12-13). It is obvious that the church knew who the insiders and the outsiders were; they knew who the members of the fellowship were. Churches today should also know who their members are and members should know that they are mem-

bers of the church. That is, the members should consciously hold a mutual commitment to one another and the larger body of believers. We refer to this as covenant membership because the members enter a covenant (or solemn agreement) to live the Christian life in fellowship with one another as the Spirit enables them.

The elders of the church have a vested interest in taking church membership seriously and in the members doing so as well, for elders are responsible to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight” (1 Pet. 5:2). A shepherd needs to know which sheep belong in the flock so that he knows for which ones he is especially responsible. Local church elders bear special responsibility for the members of their own flocks. They are the Great Hearts<sup>26</sup> who conduct Christian pilgrims on their way to the Celestial City teaching them what they need to know and protecting them from dangers.

Giving close attention to biblical membership is a high priority for the local church, in large measure, because of the church’s weighty responsibility for the care of souls. Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, laid down his life for the sheep. He purchased men for God by his blood. He knows his sheep and calls them by name. They know his voice and they follow him. Jesus takes quite seriously who is and who is not included in his flock. He also takes quite seriously the care that he has, in part, entrusted to local church pastors who serve as shepherds under his authority. If we take biblical membership seriously, we can help the church to value and care for her members in a way that honors Christ’s redemptive work and glorifies God.

## **BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP**

The apostle John wrote, “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). We can take from John’s words that one of the reasons that the apostles preached the gospel was to have fellowship with those who believed in Christ based on their witness. This shines a light on the great value of fellowship with one another that is based on our fellowship with the Father and the Son.

Most African cultures have traditionally been communally oriented. This may incline Christians in Africa toward a rich experience of fellowship and, therefore,

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<sup>26</sup> Great Heart is a guide and defender of pilgrims in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (published in two parts in 1678 and 1684). See [www.freeditorial.com/en/books/the-pilgrim-s-progress/related-books](http://www.freeditorial.com/en/books/the-pilgrim-s-progress/related-books)



be a practical advantage in pursuing health in local churches. Partly because of a communal inclination culturally, however, it is important to affirm the distinctive nature of biblical fellowship. It is based on common faith in Jesus Christ. We may share close bonds with people based on ethnic or tribal identity. We may feel close ties for other reasons as well, such as national citizenship, military service, or loyalty to a sports team. Christian fellowship is not, however, to be confused with ties due to common interests or tribal heritage. It is also not based on a common social or economic status. Christian fellowship is a spiritual reality. It is a mutual relationship based on common commitment to Christ. Christ has created “in himself one new man in the place of two, so making peace” (Eph. 2:16). Fellowship exists, as spiritual fact, between all members of the church universal. It is to be a practical experiential reality for members of the same local church. Because Christ is between us and brings us together, we encourage one another, bear one another’s burdens, and dwell in unity with one another.

Though fellowship is not tribal, members of the same tribe may well experience it. Though it is not in essence an activity, sharing together in an activity such as eating or various ministry efforts may be an expression of it. It is not essentially programmatic, though it ideally permeates the regular and occasional programs that a church emphasizes. It is a result of Christ’s atoning work and indwelling presence. It is a fruit of the gospel.

Where do we see fellowship in the New Testament? We see it as the Jerusalem church devotes itself to the word together, breaks bread together, prays together, and shares their possessions with one another (Acts 2:42-47). We see it as Barnabas lays the proceeds from the sale of a field at the apostles’ feet for sharing with his brothers and sisters in the church who have need (Acts 4:36-37). We see it in the “right hand of fellowship” that affirms apostleship and mission emphases (Gal. 2:9). We see it in the contribution from the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem church in an hour of need (2 Cor. 8 – 9). We see it in Paul calling on Philemon to receive Onesimus as “no longer a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother” (Phlm. 16). We see it in the Philippian church’s partnership in the gospel with Paul (Phil. 1:5), which they expressed in gifts of support to meet his needs (Phil. 4:14-17). So, fellowship is experienced and expressed in countless ways. I am not suggesting that churches begin a separate ministry or program called “Fellowship,” not at all.

I do suggest that leaders celebrate it, teach how to strengthen it, exemplify it, and protect it. Christians need to experience the encouragement that comes through fellowship. This is a reason not to neglect meeting together: “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to

meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24-25). We are looking together toward the Day of the Lord’s return. Until then, as Romans 15:5-7 says:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

## **BIBLICAL DISCIPLESHIP**

We know from the great commission that we are to make disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:18-19). Biblically speaking, what is a disciple? A disciple is a follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus said to Simon and Andrew, “Follow me.” Immediately they followed him (Mark 1:17-18). A disciple is also one who obeys Christ’s commands, for Jesus linked disciple making with “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). A disciple is someone who follows and obeys Jesus in faith.

We can expand on this brief definition with several things that tend to be marks of faithfully following and obeying Jesus. One of them is learning; Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matt. 11:29) and “if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). Disciples learn and abide in the word and, thereby, grow in knowledge of the Lord.

A second mark of discipleship is self-denial. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow after me” (Mark 8:34). The way of discipleship is the way of the cross. Of course, the cross is not the end of the story. Jesus suffered and then entered his glory and, so it is with his disciples. Suffering precedes and inevitably leads toward a great weight of glory (Rom. 8:16-18; 2 Cor. 4:16-17).

Servanthood is a third mark. Jesus said that “whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43). As disciples, we follow a master who “came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Importantly, servanthood is essential to leaders as well as to members of the church being faithful disciples. Pastors and elders are not to be big men who lord authority over and profit from others without accountability. Jesus girded

himself about with a towel, took a wash basin, and washed his disciples' feet. Pastors and elders are to be servant-leaders, following the example of their Master.

A fourth mark of discipleship is bearing fruit that is pleasing to the Lord. Jesus said, "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:8). Chief among the fruit that we are to bear is love for one another (John 15:12-13). Indeed, love is a sign to the world that we are disciples of the Lord Jesus (John 13:35).

Endurance is a final mark that I shall mention here. Jesus said that "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt. 10:22). Paul strengthened the souls of the disciples by encouraging them to "continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Discipleship is costly and we may endure profound loss, but any loss comes with the assurance of great reward (Mark 10:29-30).

On the one hand, discipleship is already taking place in most churches. It is happening in worship services through singing and preaching and teaching. It is happening in prayer meetings and other contexts as mature Christians provide examples for younger Christians. On the other hand, discipleship in a local church will be strengthened through explicit emphasis. Pastors can ask themselves, "What am I hoping to teach disciples in this sermon to help them grow toward maturity in Christ?" Pastors and leaders can encourage members to take personal responsibility for reading the Bible and learning to handle it well for themselves. A pastor may also gather a few men with whom he will spend time regularly in reading and studying the Bible, praying, discussing the Christian life, and engaging in ministry. These men can repeat the process with others. God will be glorified in our churches as we mature together as disciples of Jesus.

## **BIBLICAL DISCIPLINE**

Many theologians have considered the faithful practice of discipline to be an important, even an essential, mark of a true church.<sup>27</sup> It seems worth noting along this line, that in one of his only two recorded uses of the word "church" during his earthly ministry, Jesus gave instructions for discipline

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<sup>27</sup> See Robert Godfrey, "The Marks of the Church," at [www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-marks-of-the-church/](http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-marks-of-the-church/) Two other commonly identified marks of a true church are the faithful preaching of the word and the faithful administration of the sacraments or, as I have referred to them, the ordinances.

(Matt. 18:15-17). To follow our Chief Shepherd faithfully, we will want to be faithful in practicing discipline lovingly and wisely as needed.<sup>28</sup>

Broadly speaking, discipline has both formative and restorative dimensions.<sup>29</sup> That is, it involves both training and correction. Scripture is our guide in both aspects, for it is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Much formative discipline takes place through preaching and teaching, discipleship, and fellowship. Preachers and teachers engage in formative discipline as they explain and encourage living by the Spirit rather than to please the flesh. Formative discipline is taking place when discipleship leads to believers abiding in the word, handling it rightly for themselves, and being equipped to discern the will of the Lord for their speech and behavior. It is taking place as mature believers in the fellowship set good examples of faithfulness to Christ. If we engage well in formative discipline, the need for restorative discipline may be reduced.

We will not, however, eliminate the need for restorative discipline. The New Testament churches were faced with the reality of ongoing sin and refusal to repent in the lives of their members (1 Cor. 5:1-2; Rev. 2:20-21). We will face this reality in our churches also. Restorative discipline involves addressing it, particularly in cases of stubborn resistance to repentance. As previously mentioned, Jesus gave us instructions in Matthew 18:15-17 for resolving offenses in the church. The unfolding of his words will give light that we need, as will close attention to many other instructive passages, such as 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 and 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

If we feel deeply the difficulties and burden of church discipline, this is good. If we ask, as with so many responsibilities in ministry, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:16), we are thinking rightly. We are not sufficient, but we have a Savior who is. He will be with us as we address matters of discipline (Matt. 18:20). He will give us grace, wisdom, and insight regarding the paths to take in caring for his people with love and integrity, with gentleness, humility, courage, and resolve. He is committed to keep until the end those for whom He died, and he will use us in doing so. For the good of the church and the glory of her Savior, let us resolve to practice discipline biblically.

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<sup>28</sup> Some may question the relevance and practicality of church discipline in African cultural contexts. See Jones Ndzi’s incisive treatment of contextual issues in his answer to “Is Church Discipline Applicable in Africa?” in Chapter Five this volume.

<sup>29</sup> Mbewe, chapter 13.

## BIBLICAL EVANGELISM

Philip was known as an “evangelist” (Acts 21:8) and his encounter with the Ethiopian man gives us a picture of what evangelism is. Based on the Scriptures, Philip “told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). Evangelism is proclaiming the gospel or telling the good news of Jesus Christ.

The news about Jesus is good indeed! “It is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). It is the news that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). It is the news “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). As the previous sentences indicate, the gospel can be expressed in a verse or two. It is not, however, limited to a verse or two.

The good news begins in the first book of the Bible and continues through the last. The gospel is news about the true and living God who created the world and made man in his own image, male and female. This great God is king over all the earth and is worthy of glory, honor, love, and obedience. Tragically, the first man and woman disobeyed him. They sinned against him, plunging themselves and their posterity into shame, guilt, fear, pain, separation from God, and peril of eternal punishment. Sin has now affected all people, and all have chosen it. God, in great and gracious love, set out to redeem people from this peril, to rescue and reclaim people for himself. In due time, God sent his son as a Savior. His name is Jesus Christ, and he lived a sinless and righteous life. He did mighty works. He cast out demons, healed the sick, and raised the dead. He preached and taught with great wisdom, but he had come to do even more than heal bodies and teach truth. He came to give his life as a ransom for many. Though he was innocent of any sin, powerful men conspired against him and condemned him to death. But in all this, God was working out his plan for Christ to die on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for sins. He died in the place of sinners to pay the penalty for their sin. He was buried, but death could not hold him. On the third day, he was raised from the dead, victorious over sin and the grave! He ascended to heaven and is exalted there as Lord and as the Savior of all who believe in him. We cannot save ourselves, but he will save us, if we will trust in him.<sup>30</sup> He is our Deliverer from guilt, shame, fear, and the wrath to come. He gives his Spirit to those who have faith in him.<sup>31</sup> He empowers his

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<sup>30</sup> John 6:47; 20:30-31; Acts 16:31; Eph. 2:8-10.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 2:38-39; Gal. 3:2.

people to serve him and provides for their needs. From the throne in heaven, Christ will someday return to judge the living and the dead. All who have not believed in Jesus will be forever condemned to hell. Believers in Christ will be transformed into the likeness of Christ, so that God in Christ will have all glory and honor and praise for his grace in our salvation.

It is the church's privilege and responsibility to proclaim this news. Paul instructed Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus, to "do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry" (2 Tim. 4:5). Faithful pastors will prioritize evangelism personally and lead their churches to do so. They will regularly preach specifically evangelistic messages, appealing to lost people to repent and believe on Christ. It is good for church members to be confident that friends and family members whom they invite to church services will be hearing the gospel message clearly.

Because the members of the body have various and complementary gifts, different members will be able to participate in evangelistic efforts in different ways. Wise leaders will help members get involved in evangelism in ways that are in keeping with their gifts. Few things will ignite healthy enthusiasm in the hearts of church members more than lost people turning to Christ as Savior and coming into the church fellowship. When this is happening, members are encouraged and God is glorified, for the good news is going forth and people are being saved.

## **BIBLICAL MISSION**

Is involvement in mission necessary to health in local churches? Consider this description of church health: "Not only is the church organized to share the gospel and make disciples locally, but it is also organized [for] and actively involved in taking the gospel to the nations."<sup>32</sup> Do you agree? If so, why?

What would motivate a local church to engage in mission to reach the tribes and nations of the world with the good news of salvation in Christ? One motive is Jesus' command, a command that he has coupled with a wonderful promise. He said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations .... And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20). Making disciples of the nations is a daunting task. It is precious to us to have the promise that Christ does not leave us alone in it. Augustine, the African pastor and theologian, said, "Lord, command what you will and grant what

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<sup>32</sup> Foundations, page 64.

you command.” He will not withhold any good thing that we need for obedience. He commands us to go, and he goes with us.

Some African churches are now sending African missionaries to the ends of the earth. Others may not be ready at this point to send workers cross-culturally from their own congregations, but all churches can be involved in some way in missions now. Pastors can preach and teach about the Great Commission and lead their churches to pray for the gospel to go to all nations. Churches can join at some level in supporting missionaries from sister churches financially and in prayer. We are all stewards of the Great Commission, and we want to hear from our Master, “Well done my good and faithful servant.”

A second motive for mission is love. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Now “God’s love has been poured into our hearts” (Rom. 5:5) and stirs our compassion for the tribes and people groups across the globe that remain unreached with the message of Christ. “How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?” (Rom. 10:14). It is estimated that 150,000 people die daily without a saving knowledge of Christ,<sup>33</sup> many of them without ever hearing the good news of the Savior. Love motivates the local church to share in reaching the unreached.

A third motive for mission is desire for God’s glory in Christ. We desire for the redeemed from every tribe, language, people, and nation to give him glory at the throne of heaven shouting that “Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!” By his blood the Lamb of God has “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). The redeemed from among the nations are the reward of his suffering and we long for him to have it. We long for the lost to hear of the Savior, to love him, and to glorify him in wholehearted worship with us.

## CONCLUSION

If you have read this chapter and feel that the local church which you serve exhibits many of the biblical characteristics, this is reason for great praise and thanksgiving! I am quite sure that we all know that it is not a reason for arrogance. After all, “unless the Lord builds the house those who build it labor in vain” (Psa. 127:1). It is not reason for brazen confidence in ourselves: “Let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Jesus builds his

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Chitwood, see [www.imb.org/2020/05/14/imb-trustees-meet-virtually](http://www.imb.org/2020/05/14/imb-trustees-meet-virtually)

church and, if we are wise, we will trust him as the master builder to do what only he can do.

If you have read this chapter and feel that the local church which you serve is a poor example of the biblical characteristics, do not be discouraged. When he came walking on the sea, Jesus said to his disciples, “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid” (Mark 6:50). He is with you and will be with you (Matt. 28:20). He builds his church, and we can trust him to do what only he can do. The growth, strengthening and perfecting of the church is a process that continues until Jesus comes and will be miraculously accomplished at his coming. This is one of the reasons that the church’s existence is for the glory of God—its perseverance and perfection are his work. How gracious he is to include us in such an important undertaking!





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## CONCLUSION

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- Coye Still -

Though much more that is profitable could be said in a study of the church, we must now conclude this volume. It is time to reflect on the ground that has been covered and rejoice in great things that we have affirmed along the way.

In the first part of this book, we traced the biblical storyline of the church from God's promises to Abraham in Genesis to a glorious eternal future in the book of Revelation. We also focused on foundational matters of church leadership, closely considering the crucial texts related to the offices of pastor and deacon. Seeing God's design for these offices is of high importance because, as Jones Ndzi wrote in the Introduction to this volume, "the gospel is essentially obscured when the church ... is established and run in patently unbiblical ways."

In the second part, we affirmed that African church history is rich and long and integrally related to the history of the church globally. We also saw that in the last century church growth and multiplication in Africa have progressed at a phenomenal pace. In many ways, God has positioned African churches for strategic leadership and we pray for African churches to send many more African missionaries to the ends of the earth in this generation. In part two, we also acknowledged that the challenges that African churches face in their own contexts are many and great. These challenges arise from multi-ethnicity, shame and honor dynamics, African Traditional Religions, the Prosperity Gospel, Islam, and Roman Catholicism. All the challenges "are of great height" (Num. 13:32) and may make African believers and churches seem to themselves "like grasshoppers" (Num. 13:33), but at what time in her history has the church not faced big challenges and when has God been unable to give his church victory?

In the third part of this book, Jones Ndzi skillfully navigated ways of responding to the contextual challenges. His "Concluding Questions and Answers" are of great practical value in many ways, including as examples of

how to think through these types of questions scripturally. The chapter on biblical characteristics of a healthy church deals in some detail with complementary components of a biblical portrait of a healthy church. It is a portrait of, for now, an imperfect church that is progressing faithfully toward maturity in Christ and the glory of God.

The details throughout the preceding three major parts and six chapters are important and we have tried to give proper attention to them. Details matter because it is essential that our local churches are established and function biblically, but this book is about more than details and component parts. It is also about a view of and conviction regarding the church. This book is about loving and valuing the church as Christ does. He loved the church and gave himself up for her (Eph. 5:25). Indeed, she was “obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). As the Introduction affirms, Jesus is applying himself faithfully to building his church (Matt. 16:18). God has chosen to bless the nations in Christ as the church proclaims him to the ends of the earth and God will surely accomplish all his purposes to his great glory in the church.

Confidence that he will do so is firmly founded on the promises that he who began a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6) and that Christ will “present the church to himself in splendor” (Eph. 5:27). Such promises profoundly cheer us for the labor that lies ahead. They assure us that we are not left alone in the work of glorifying God in the church. We are not left to strive in our own frailty. We can devote ourselves as good servants of the church precisely because “we are God’s fellow workers” (1 Cor. 3:9). He is wise and will lead us in good paths. He is mighty and will be our strength. He will most assuredly accomplish his purposes. There is much work to be done and we are to apply ourselves diligently to it “with all his energy that he powerfully works” within us (Col 1:28-29) knowing that “he is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think” (Eph 3:20). In the end, we shall see what God has accomplished and say, “To God be glory in the church” (Eph. 3:21).

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The **Africa Theology Series** is a multi-volume set of books covering biblical, systematic and applied theology. The series is written in a way that will be accessible in nature and pastoral in tone. Each short book helps the reader understand the theological foundations, cultural implications and practical applications of key doctrines in the Christian faith. The series aims to give the pastor or lay leader contextualized tools needed to understand and defend their faith against the competing worldviews found in Africa.

*The Doctrine of the Church* unfolds in three parts. The first considers the notion of the church as it develops through the storyline of the Bible and the church's biblical offices. Part two is a discussion of the history of the church in Africa in relation to the global church, and of major contextual challenges she currently faces. Part three includes responses to the current challenges, answers to practical questions, and a discussion of key characteristics of a healthy local church. Throughout, readers will be encouraged regarding the church's incalculable value, great importance for the perseverance of the saints, key role in finishing the Great commission, and sure hope that God will gloriously complete the good work he has begun in her.

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