

ten things

a letter to church leadership

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preface

About 2000 years ago, God, the perfect Creator of the universe, sent His Son, Jesus, to Earth. Jesus intensely taught God's plan and principles for living to a group of 11 followers, and then gave His life on a Roman cross to pay the price for the sins of all humanity. In the years that followed His death, resurrection and return to the Father, these followers and those they taught built the "church." This church was built on the foundation of the message of Jesus and who He was. Although they were flawed human beings they lived lives of compassion and succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of any human imagination in presenting the message of Jesus in a way that endured, and in fulfilling His plan. But something is wrong.

Several years ago, a pastor asked me, "why will our people not reach out to others to share Jesus with them? How do we motivate them to see and care?" I have spent much of my time since then thinking and praying about the answers to this question. I have come to the conclusion that many of the problems we experience in fulfilling our fundamental mission of making disciples stem from the failure of the modern church to acknowledge or apply key principles of New Testament church life. By this I don't mean that there are no churches that preach the true message of salvation by grace. Instead there seem to be very few assemblies of believers that apply the principles that are necessary for that message to be effective. Most of the time when we hear about these principles at all, they are applied only to individuals, and not to how we as believers come together to fulfill our mission. But until we apply all of them as a body, we will never be the effective ministers of the Gospel we are all called to be.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote:

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land:
The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests rule on their own authority;
And My people love it so!
But what will you do at the end of it? *Jeremiah 5:30-31.*

I fear that we have far too often created church in our own image, on our own authority. If we do not repent and return to a correct relationship with God – one that accepts His plan, purpose, and vision for the church, what will we do at the end of it?

A Note on how to become a follower of Jesus: If you have read this introduction and said to yourself "who is Jesus anyway and why is He important," or "what is a follower of Jesus?" I strongly urge you to read my story in the appendix to this letter. It tells you about how I met Jesus, who He is in my life and how He changed it. It doesn't matter what your position, ministry, or title is, whether you grew up thinking you were a Christian, whether you've walked an aisle or been baptized, or how long you've spent in church or how hard you've worked to be good – none of that will free you from the bondage your sin and the sin of this world puts on your life. You still have to deal with God on a very personal level, and make a decision in faith about whether you are going to accept Jesus' sacrifice in your life. He has to change who you are before you can be His follower or implement His principles.

principle 1: the body is responsible

One of the most common thought processes in modern assemblies of believers seems to be that we can hide our mistakes behind a vote of the majority or behind a determination by a committee. What passes for "God's Will" most of the time seems to be whatever the majority decides. This "majority is always holy" approach leads to disastrous outcomes. We must come to terms with the fact that **collectively we can decide to do things that are ungodly**. We must critically and prayerfully evaluate the decisions we make and have made – small and large – in terms of our calling, our mission, and God's plan. A review of the New Testament shows that most of it was written to assemblies or bodies of believers who made wrong collective choices. Paul writes to the "churches of Galatia" and expresses his amazement that they are "deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel." *Galatians 1:2, 6*. In the book of Revelation, God sends messengers to each of the seven churches of Asia to speak to them **collectively** about their right and wrong group decisions. His message to five out of seven of those assemblies was to repent.

What happens if we fail to pay attention to the responsibility we have as assemblies of followers of Jesus? The worst possible outcome: we fail in our mission and people die without Christ. It is us alone, His church, to whom Jesus has given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven – keys to life eternal and life abundant. How will they hear without someone to tell them? If we fail in our basic mission, the message of Christ is bound and silent. *Matthew 16:19*. Not only that, but eventually, we lose our authority and place even to speak for Jesus. In Revelation, Jesus told a church whose "first love" had grown cold to "remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place--unless you repent." *Revelation 2:5*. A church that loses its lampstand loses the base from which its light would otherwise shine. It has no platform or foundation from which to speak. In Romans, Paul wrote "But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either." *Romans 11:17-21*.

The truth is that if we as God's people are not committed to evaluating our own actions critically, focusing on God's plan, His mission, and His truth, He will evaluate them for us and we will lose our voice and our value in service to Him.

principle 2: repentance is essential

About four years ago, I was driving home from a Bible study when God spoke to me. I do not make this claim lightly, and frankly, this is the only point in my life at which I would say that God gave me such a direct message. I'm telling this to you because I believe that this statement places certain scriptural obligations on you as a teacher, elder, pastor, or however you view your role as a responsible person in the body. First, because I claim to be your brother in Christ and to have a message for you and your assembly from God, you are obligated at the very least to listen to it. But more than that, you need to make a determination as to whether the claim and the message are valid. *I Corinthians 14:29, I John 4:1-3*. The message God gave me was "Repent." While there was just the word, it carried so much more meaning than one word. It gave a focus to the void in church life I had been struggling to explain, and clarified exactly what was missing in our relationship with God. We as assemblies of believers no longer believe we have a need to repent together.

a. why think of repentance?

The prophet Micah wrote:

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8.

If we are to stand justified before a holy God, it must be in humility. Can we truly say that all is right in our ministries, in our assemblies, in our love for one another and in our love for those who hate us? If not, the only path for us is repentance. A pastor told me once that he had never seen a powerful move of God in God's people. Neither have most of us. It is the failure of the church to repent that prevents us from seeing true revival – not a temporary emotional catharsis – but real revival, where people actually develop a hunger for the Word of God, and a desire to follow Jesus on His terms.

b. a picture of repentance

For an outline of repentance in scripture that affects not just an individual, but a people, King Josiah of Israel provides a valuable picture. All of the necessary elements of effective repentance are present. They include:

1. a vision of something lost and a hunger for righteousness

Josiah had an awareness of the need for God in his life, and a basic desire to be pleasing to Him. In *2 Kings 22:4-7*, Josiah takes action to restore God's presence in Israel by beginning to restore the temple. In response to Josiah's search for Him, God calls his Word to Josiah's attention and it is made clear that the people of Israel have failed to remain true to God. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." *Matthew 5:6*.

2. a search for God's will

Josiah's response is to ask God what to do, recognizing the failure of the people to honor Him. *II Kings 22:13*. In many of our own lives, as in the people of Israel's, this is the point where we fail - instead of inquiring of God as to how to remedy the flaws that have been exposed by His Word, we instead:

defend ourselves ("I'm basically a good 'Christian' person" or "God made me this way, so why should I have to change"), or

decide the message is unimportant ("my sin is not that bad, unlike the sins of some people"), or

flatly defy God ("you are attacking me as a person when you say I am sinning - I have a right to be what I choose to be.").

What this really amounts to is a denial of the authority that God has in our lives. We need to carefully study God's response to King Saul after Saul's defiance of God's direction and subsequent attempt to justify himself.

"But Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel." *I Samuel 15:26*. There is a point past which our defiance and self-justification become irredeemable. Not in the sense of individual eternal life, which is bought by Jesus blood and found through grace, but in the sense that our lives and our mission can become completely worthless. *Hebrews 6:4-8, I Corinthians 3:11-16*.

3. a broken heart

God told Josiah that:

"because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants that they should become a desolation and a curse, and you have torn your clothes and wept before Me, I truly have heard you."

II Kings 22:19.

Do we weep? Jesus said "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." *Matthew 5:4*. God listens to those whose hearts are broken in repentance.

4. a voice and a message

There is one last thing that, although not a part of the repentance process, is a necessary outcome: the desire to tell the Truth that has been found to others. After receiving God's response, Josiah gathered Israel together to share what he had found with them. *II Kings 23:1-3*. In the same manner, Peter, was forgiven and reaffirmed in his mission by Jesus after Peter had denied Him. He then preached powerfully on the day of Pentecost, and 3000 people responded to his message.

James expresses this concept when he writes "But someone may well say, ' You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.'" *James 2:18*. True repentance is characterized by true change and a true message.

c. what do we have to repent of?

It never dawns on us as churches that we as a group may have failed to fulfill our mission or may have collectively injured those around us. ***In our arrogance we look at our failures to preach effectively, to love in truth, and to have community in Christ, and we blame those failures on “God's Will.”*** Or we find an individual within the body to carry the blame.

So what is there for the church to repent of? Maybe we should ask instead, “what is there not to repent of?”

We as assemblies have, in no particular order:

Made people feel unwelcome, unloved, and worst of all, not as important to God because of their race, wealth, social position, the mistakes they have made, or even their lack of ability. *See James 2:1-13.*

Attacked our brothers and sisters behind their backs, and built a church culture that even defends these attacks, claiming that making fun of each other, telling harmful stories about each other, true and false, and cutting each other down is part of how we build a sense of community. *See Ephesians 4:29.*

Abandoned any pretense of mission in deciding how we spend our resources, choosing our own comfort and security over the well being both of those who are in physical need and those who are dying without knowing Jesus. Just because we have enough money to build a new building doesn't mean God wants us to build a structure that stays empty 90 percent of the week and offers no help to those around us. *James 1:27, Titus 2:6-7, Deuteronomy 24:19-21.*

Adopted patterns of decision-making that simply don't acknowledge God or the leadership of Christ over our ministries. When was the last business meeting or committee meeting you were in where you spent half the meeting in prayer about God's plan before deciding what actions to take? *Acts 13:1-3, Acts 1:12-14.*

Refused to adopt Christian patterns of dispute resolution or reconciliation, choosing instead to attack those who hurt us personally and look down on those who fail publicly, – not because they failed, but because they had the poor grace to get caught and “embarrass the church.” *See Galatians 6:1-5.*

Abandoned selfless Love as a core doctrine. Faith, Hope and Love don't even show up on many of our doctrinal statements of belief, much less in our core teaching and practice. And yet Paul says that without love, we and our work are nothing. *I Corinthians 13:1-3, see also Revelation 2:1-7.*

Focused our outreach and our witness on everything but Jesus. We will describe our pastor's biography, our ladies' group's planned activities, and our dynamic youth program on our websites, in our advertising, on our T-shirts. But we balk at talking about Jesus or what He has done for us in any personal or real terms, assuming we talk about Him at all. *Matthew 10:32.*

Chosen for ourselves “leaders” based on youth, charisma, and pleasant teaching rather than on demonstrated lives of service, identity as followers of Jesus, and demonstrated perseverance in mission. *II Timothy 4:3, Philippians 3:17-21.*

Abandoned our core mission of witness and discipleship in favor of attempts to obtain temporal political power. *John 18:36, Acts 1:8.*

While this list is not comprehensive, it should give us a good place for starting self-evaluation. If we are not to become part of the Laodicean church's heritage, we must admit our flaws and repent now.

d. counting the cost of repentance

There is one other thing that goes with a message of repentance. There is a cost to presenting it. For a modern church leader, telling his church or even other church leaders that the church needs to pray and repent and demanding application of those ideas can leave him standing as Jeremiah, Elijah, and most of the other prophets stood when they called for repentance – apparently alone. Difficult Truths can result in the loss of entire congregations. Jesus lost a very large group of people over one message. *John 6:66-71.* This message of repentance must be dealt with and applied. But understand first that there can be a significant cost to truly confronting a church with the its need to repent. *Luke 14:25-35.*

With that cost also come promises. When Jeremiah was almost crushed by the apparent failure of his message, God told him:

“If you repent, I will restore you
that you may serve me;
if you utter worthy, not worthless, words,
you will be my spokesman.
Let this people turn to you,
but you must not turn to them.

I will make you a wall to this people,
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you
but will not overcome you,
for I am with you
to rescue and save you,"
declares the LORD.

“I will save you from the hands of the wicked
and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel.”

Jeremiah 15:19-21

principle 3: focus on Jesus

In *Acts 1:8*, Jesus left us with a very specific and very powerful vision. It was a vision of telling the entire world about the love He has for us, about the sacrifice He made for us, and about the change He has made in the lives of those who believe in Him. The mission we have been given is simple in concept – simple enough that we teach it in Bible Schools to grade school children. We sing “I will make you fishers of men if you follow me.” We memorize the Great Commission from *Matthew 28:19*. We read where Paul wrote “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you but Christ and Him crucified.” And yet. And yet. And yet we consistently move away from the simplicity of the Call and instead try, as Cain did, to worship on our own terms. To build our own church with our plans and our values and our marketing strategies. And in doing so, we marginalize the sacrifice of Jesus, the power of His message, and the value of His grace.

a. without a vision, the people perish – what would Jesus see?

What is a vision? Jesus said more than once “he who has ears, let him hear.” It is clear both from Jesus' ministry and from the subsequent ministries of His followers that many, many people just never got a clue. One large group of people watched Jesus do miracles before them, and listened to Him tell them about the kingdom of heaven, and the only thing they got out of it was that He was handing out free food. *John 6:34*.

We live in a world that is focused on the physical. In the church we rarely get past that. We pray for physical healing. We pray for our physical wants. We pray for money. We pray that we can get along. We focus on buildings, on attendance numbers, and on outward indications of “holiness.” But Jesus spent much of His earthly ministry teaching people to look past the physical to the eternal. He said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.” *John 18:36*. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” *Matthew 6:19-20*.

We have to break out of our temporal mindset and set our minds on things of the Spirit. What this means is: success is not defined by how many people we have in our congregations, but on whether we are fulfilling our mission to witness together in love. It means our building programs are irrelevant to what God can do through us to reach our community. It means we need to spend more time praying for opportunities to tell people about Jesus than for our health and our financial problems. It means we need to recognize our resources for what they are: an opportunity to get involved in the lives of people who are in physical need, but who even more are in spiritual need of the message of hope we have been given.

Jesus saw the world in spiritual, eternal terms. Until we learn to do the same, we will never be effective followers of Him.

b. citizenship and politics – christianity, our rights, and the idol that is the american dream

Modern christianity consistently fails to clearly define what it is that makes us christian. We identify our country as a “christian” nation because it espouses a belief in “God.” We recognize as “christian” those around us who hold political views that we identify with. We call America “blessed”

because we have lots of stuff. But being rich is not being blessed. Defending our rights is not Godly. And the "American Dream" is a lie.

That sounds pretty harsh. It's intended to. Lets see what God says about blessing, defending our rights, and whether belief in God or Godly values is sufficient to call us Christian.

Jesus preached a fairly famous message on the Mount of Olives in which He set out criteria for blessing. Not once in the list of who is blessed found in *Matthew 5:1-12* is there a statement that says "Blessed are those who have lots of stuff, for they shall be comfortable." And yet we generally assume that America is a "blessed nation" because we have physical comfort.

We have a problem with Thomas Jefferson. We elevate the principles in his Declaration of Independence that have led to the physical comfort we have, and say that they espouse Godly values. But we never ask whether they are true. Lets start with the idea of man being endowed by his Creator with "inalienable rights." The arrogance of that idea is staggering. It is the concept that leads to modern society's claim that God has no right to judge what we do. If our rights are "inalienable" it means they cannot rightfully be taken from us by any power. But those "rights" don't even exist in the life of a person who doesn't have Christ. The ideas they represent are available only to those who humble themselves before God and place their faith in Jesus.

Life: *Ephesians 2* says we were "dead in your trespasses and sin." *Romans 6:23* says "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Liberty: "For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin." *Romans 7:14*. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." *II Corinthians 3:17*.

Pursuit of Happiness: The modern permutation of this idea is probably best summed up by Nike's advertising campaign that says "Just Do It." It includes the Horatio Alger idea that we can make of ourselves whatever we choose. It includes the Depak Chopra/Joel Osteen idea of self-actualization, that says if we simply visualize what we desire, the universe or God or whatever other power we recognize will make it happen. The claim of a "right" to pursue happiness is a defiant statement that says we can order our own lives, to the exclusion of any other authority or moral system. And yet the Bible says: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." *Proverbs 14:12*.

A Christian declaration of independence would read very differently:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men have sinned against their Creator and forfeited all rights to life and liberty, but have access by faith through the blood, mercy and grace of Jesus to life eternal, to liberty and freedom from bondage to sin, and to the joy that comes from living lives as bondservants to the Word that became flesh, Jesus, the Son of the Living God.

Unfortunately for our philosophical comfort level, this declaration places us in conflict with American ideas of tolerance, and with the core value of America that says each person has a right to define the parameters of his or her own life. The real Truth is that freedom is nothing but a hopeless path to death, unless it is the freedom Jesus offers.

The Truth also is that we cannot expect people to live on God's terms, in the freedom we have, if they don't have Jesus in their lives. All of our attempts at politics and our efforts to shape a "christian" society are ultimately doomed because the people we are attempting to work with to build that society do not know Jesus. Even if we succeed in creating a society that is "christian" in terms of values and outward appearance, they still do not know Jesus. Any freedom and liberty we create on America's terms, instead of God's terms of faith in Christ, is an illusion.

c. **God's way and our deadly elevation of talent over faith**

There is a parable that is often taught, but because of a translation decision that has created an unfortunate word association, rarely taught well. It is the parable of the "talents." For purposes of discussion, let's take the word "talent," which meant a very large identifiable sum of money when Jesus told the story, and instead call it "something of value." Then let's also recognize that a parable of Jesus virtually never, by its nature, relates literally to what the story is being told about, but instead is designed to illustrate a spiritual principle. With that in mind, let's look at this story -

A wealthy man left **something of value** with each of his three servants and left town. The first two servants took the **valuable things** that were left with them, invested them, and received praise from their master. The third, in fear and possibly out of laziness, took the **valuable thing** and buried it.

We know the outcomes in each of the servant's lives. Two were commended as faithful servants for investing the value that had been left with them. One was cast out.

If this is a parable about our churches and their service to Jesus, it is imperative that we quit playing word games with it. We have used this parable as a justification for holding up people with "talent" as being somehow more holy or blessed than those with no apparent physical or mental gift or ability, and that's not simply a mistake, it's sin. *James 2. Read the whole chapter.*

Worse than that, this focus on physical gifts amounts to a direct attack on God's plan for sharing His word with the world. If there is any principle about how God deals with man that is clear, it is that God chooses people who are physically less than impressive to carry out His plans. This pattern extends from Gideon to David to Paul, who "did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God." *I Corinthians 2:1.* Jesus Himself had "no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him." *Isaiah 53:2.* Until we stop glorifying charisma, intellect, and talent, we will never be useful to God, because the faith of the people we reach will rest on men's wisdom.

So if the "talents" in the parable are not physical and mental ability, what are they? What is it that Jesus left us that had real value? For any believer, this answer should be elementary. Jesus left us Grace. The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. He left us even more than that. Jesus left us Faith, Hope and Love. These are the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. If you look at I Corinthians 13, you will find it starts with a discussion of what has value. Paul says "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." *I Corinthians 13:1-3.*

These are the things we have been left to invest – Faith, Hope, Love, and the message of Grace in Christ Jesus. The thing He left us of value was to live a life that incorporated these things. Nothing else. Paul, in defining his value system, “resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” I am afraid we have resolved to know all sorts of things that are not that.

Conclusion

We have to reexamine our vision of how we relate to the world and what we are called to be. We have to abandon the American political ethic that permeates Christian thought and return to a biblical ethic, one that places the spiritual well being of those around us above any concern for our rights. One that places Faith, Hope and Love above considerations of personal happiness. One that recognizes we have been given Grace and Life to invest. Above all, we must focus on the reality of Jesus in our lives.

principle 4: don't lead

This section is written particularly to those who have identified themselves as having a “call to full-time ministry.” We have accepted “full-time ministry” as an integral part of church life for so long that we have lost sight of how it came about, and what the idea really means. We have elevated vocation over faith, over message and over personal discipleship. We make statements that say “you may not respect the person, but you have to respect the position” and quote them as if they were scripture. We assume people are somehow more committed or more Godly because they are on salary or have a “call.” And when we find ourselves in positions that look like “leadership” positions, we use those positions to promote our own ideas, and to cloak our own lack of discipleship in popularity, in “respectability,” and in claimed intellectual superiority.

There is often a lament raised at how few young men “surrender to preach.” It is a cry that says “we need more christian leaders!” Unfortunately, “christian leaders,” are exactly what we don't need. We have a Leader who is perfect, blameless and holy. What we need are men to grow up in the grace of Jesus, living lives of service that can be followed and emulated. We need brothers in Christ, fellow servants we can love and serve and pray with, men who are focused on mission, not position or title. We need men and women to surrender, not to “ministry” but to the call that Jesus gave Peter, James, John, and the rest of the twelve. “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

a. what does God require of a man – the Moses complex

There is a particular kind of egotism that seems to attach itself to Christian leadership. It is a false identification with Jesus in the sense that we tend to see ourselves, not as servants, but as saviors. Sometimes this motivation can consume a life and even divert it from the message that we actually need a perfect savior. It seems most often to appear in terms of a feeling that we have a “special call” - a call to “lead God's people.”

The idea of such a call to lead is in conflict with practically every biblical principle of how God relates to followers of Jesus and with the commands Jesus left us with. In its worst manifestations this leadership idea develops into a claim that a pastor or leader is the authority God has placed over His people. It creates an idea that God only speaks to that pastor and that the people of a church should simply follow what he says. Even worse, it can lead to sin of staggering and deadly proportions, when that pastor refuses to listen to, and even denies the source of, messages that have been given to other members of the body by the Holy Spirit.

There is no question that Jesus utterly rejected a leadership idea that said that one man in any context had all the answers. In Matthew, Chapter 23, Jesus said:

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

A Rabbi in the culture in which Jesus lived would translate as “a teacher with authority.” Indeed, the recognition of Jesus as such a teacher was one of the most amazing things about Him to a people who had lived without God's voice for almost 500 years. (“When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.” *Matthew 7:28-29*). There will be no legitimate call in the life of a follower of Jesus that would place him in a position to claim that he is a teacher with authority, because Jesus is our Rabbi. He is our sole authority.

This idea that authority is left with God, not man, is consistent with God's dealings with Israel in the Old Testament as well. There is not space here to review the history of Israel's cry for a king, but the outcome of Israel's consistent search for a man of authority is apparent. The quote from Jeremiah that opened this letter describes a nation in which purported spiritual leaders “rule on their own authority” as “appalling and horrible.” *Jeremiah 5:30-31*.

This is not to say we are left without teachers (with a small “t”). There clearly are spiritual gifts that give some people the capacity to teach with more than natural effectiveness. There are also gifts that give some people the capacity to shepherd in the same way. (Where shepherding is given its obvious intent – keeping straying sheep in the body, and keeping the body's focus on Christ). But the authority is left with Jesus alone. Indeed a review of the spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12 clearly places prophecy (messages from God) ahead of teaching in importance. Why? Because God's messages are more important than ours. God's messages have authority. That does not mean that we should simply take any purported prophetic message as Truth, but it does require that we evaluate messages that make that claim, rather than simply ignore them.

b. the roles of the under-shepherd and the apostle

In messages preached about the authority of church leaders, there is very often a reliance on *Hebrews 13:17*, which says: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” Those of us who find ourselves in “leadership positions” really like this scripture, because when taken alone, it looks like people should do what we say. But if we look at what Jesus has already said about calling ourselves leaders, and look at God's anger at leaders ruling on their own authority, we should be very careful not to create that bane of Christian existence and sound doctrine, a one verse theology.

Indeed, we do not have to look very far to see that the authority in our lives referred to is not authority of a position or office that we are somehow called to respect, regardless of the conduct of the holder of that office. Instead it is the inherent authority held by someone who has lived a life for Christ. It is the authority of Jesus in the lives of those we disciple. Earlier in the chapter, the writer of Hebrews explicitly identifies who our “leaders” are. He writes “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.” This is not a discussion of position in church hierarchy. It is a discussion of core discipleship principles. This means that the authorities in our lives may not hold a position in a church at all. They are the people who spoke truth to us personally. The people who spoke about Jesus and the cross in our lives. The people who encouraged us to grow in Him and established those principles of growth.

And it is people with these characteristics Paul consistently said we should give authority to in our lives. In *Philippians 3:17*, Paul told us to “join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.” He said “Be imitators of me, just as

I also am of Christ.” *I Corinthians 11:1*. Any true authority as leaders we have in peoples lives comes not from a special call, but from our own lives as disciples. We either live lives of humility and service and focus on Christ that are worth emulating, or we don't. We have no right to have people follow us. All we have is the assurance that if we live the lives God has called us to, they will not be fruitless.

1. elders and the example principle

So what is an Elder? *I Timothy 2* is where we have always looked for our qualifications for “preachers.” We have then, in fairly legalistic fashion, tried to impose those qualifications on young men who clearly cannot meet them if they are evaluated in any principled sense. What Paul is saying in verses 1-7 is that Elders have to have already lived lives like those described in *Philippians 3:17*, *I Corinthians 11:1*, and *Hebrews 13*. Lives from which they can say, follow me as I follow Jesus. Lives people in the assembly already look to as authoritative in their own lives. Lives that have more wisdom than ego, more love than self-interest, and more focus on the things of God than the things of the world. Lives that have raised children who have followed their parents' examples and grown up as followers of Jesus themselves.

Elders who met those qualifications would have a radically different impact on the church than “young preachers.” They would more often be willing to recognize their limitations and subordinate their egos to the good of the mission and of the body. They would recognize the impossibility of creating anything of lasting value that had them as the authoritative “head” of it. They would be drawn, not from people with talent or charisma, but from people with faith and love. Their qualifications would not be based on worldly achievement, but on demonstrated mercy, justice and humility in their own lives. They would be mature men who had lived through many of the life difficulties they were dealing with in the lives of others. They would not be the sole teachers in the body, but they would hold those who taught accountable for focus on Jesus and mission. Perhaps most importantly, they would look for others with the same heart to become Elders with them, instead of defending their perceived positions of individual power.

Elders would also be men who were family. Men who were part of the body before they became elders. We would no longer have to look to a "professional clergy" to find direction. Direction would come from within what had become a truly mature church.

One thing that is clear from Paul's focus on lives lived for Christ is that Eldership cannot be trained. It cannot be conferred in a certificate. It has to be drawn from the evidence of commitment in one's own life. We don't need more young men to “surrender to pastor.” We need young men to surrender to the call to follow Jesus with their lives. We need mature followers of Jesus to then surrender to serve as elders whose lives can be followed.

2. being Timothy

In addition to eldership, there is another position for maintaining church focus and mission established in the New Testament. It is the office of Timothy himself. He and his life are often presented as the model for a young preacher and how he should conduct ministry. But there are key characteristics of Timothy's instruction and mission that are generally ignored.

First, Timothy was young only in terms of church leadership in the time period. It is highly unlikely that he was less than 30 when he began working at Ephesus, and had clearly spent years as a disciple, following Paul, learning from his life and example, and coming to terms with his own commitment to Christ.

Second, Timothy had a call of limited duration at Ephesus. Paul wrote to Timothy: “As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith.” *I Timothy 1:3-4*. It was not a call to Eldership – rather it was a call to church planting. Timothy was working in an apostolic capacity in Ephesus, continuing the work of building a mature church there, with the intention, not of becoming that church's head, but of discipling men from that church community itself who would serve as elders, teachers, pastors and evangelists. This is the same mission Paul left with Titus in Crete. “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.” *Titus 1:5*.

Third, Timothy's call was confirmed, not in himself, but in the prophetic utterance of others, just as the call of Paul and Barnabas was in Acts 13. Timothy was not a self-identified missionary. He was sent by other mature Christians – elders, teachers, and prophets – when God spoke to them. *I Timothy 1:18*.

c. what does God want from where you are now?

If you are a pastor with a heart for Jesus, God has a specific mission for you in today's church. It is one that may ultimately require the sacrifice of your position in the church you pastor. It is one that may cost you your salary. And it is one which, maybe most difficult for many of us, will certainly require you to let others have access to your pulpit from which to speak while you listen. Why?

Because when you responded to a call to ministry in your life, at age 18, or 20, or 40 or whenever, it wasn't what you thought. It wasn't a call to a position or a vocation, it was a call to follow Jesus. Because He has called us all to be servants, not leaders.

Because your mission, if it is a call of God in your life, is the same as the mission of Timothy and Titus. Your goal should be to teach and raise up disciples in your church to the point that you are no longer alone in maturity, in voice, in teaching, in pastoring. To the point where people no longer look to you for authority but instead go to Jesus. To the point that the church you pastor is no longer identified as “your church.” To the point that your name comes off the church sign and the website as the church's primary identifier in the community. Even to the point that should you leave, the church would no longer have to look outside itself for elders, teachers and pastors to “call,” and that while the church might miss you on a personal level, the mission wouldn't miss you at all.

Choosing God's mission instead of your position will have the added personal benefit of bringing joy to your life. Your role will no longer be to be alone and outside the body itself, but instead to be a fellow servant with those around you. You will be free to fail and be forgiven, without fear of the repercussions on your reputation and ability to serve. Your children will be free to grow up without the impossible expectation that they live lives without sin. You will have people to pray with - not just for.

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” *John 3:30*.

About Accountability: *I have heard many pastors contend that they are not accountable to other believers for what they teach, for how they live, or for how they lead. They argue that they have a special call from God to lead His people, and are therefore accountable to God alone. But God's accountability requires recognition that we are all brothers and fellow servants – it leaves no room for a self-proclaimed leader. And if we are all brothers, an argument that denies mutual accountability cannot be true. There is no exception in Galatians 6 for pastors. We all stand before God in the same position: sinners, saved by grace, who struggle with sin, the mission and the call we have ALL been given. Or we stand alone in pride and arrogance and don't struggle at all, and become useless – “whited sepulchers” would be how Jesus would describe us. Pastors must drop the masks and accept their brothers and sisters as partners, co-laborers, and as people who may have things to teach them about following Jesus. They must see their brothers and sisters as people to pray and minister with, not just be prayed for by, and they must see them as people to be accountable to. Until pastors do, they will labor alone, and ultimately, in futility.*

principle 5: motivate with love

There is a long-standing tendency in Christianity to motivate action with guilt. Guilt is an easy lever. It creates easy to apply standards: if you do “x” you are guilty. If you do not do “x,” you are not guilty. It also lends itself well to determining how well other members of our assemblies are serving Jesus. If they do “x” they are “acting like good Christians.” If they do “y” they are not. Guilt is particularly effective with a younger audience – one that is used to parental authority. We can tell them to keep God's law or we will judge them by it, and for most of the first eighteen years of their lives, they are likely to do so out of fear. That is until they don't fear us anymore and simply become bitter and discouraged with the fact they fail to meet the mark, which they will. *Colossians 3:21, Romans 7:19.*

Using guilt to motivate is fundamentally at odds with both the nature of the relationship we have with God and with the purpose He has for our lives in Christ. Jesus did **not** say “if you feel guilty, you will keep my commandments.” He said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who **loves** Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.” *John 14:21.*

If we don't believe this distinction is important, we have missed much of Jesus' message. Jesus told His listeners that their motivations were supremely important to God. He explained that they could live a life without killing anyone, and yet be guilty of murder because of their motivation in calling someone a fool. *Matthew 5:21-22.* Jesus looked at the Pharisees who gave from everything they produced in exact accordance with the requirements of the law and told them they had missed the greater parts of the law. *Matthew 23:23.* He told them “But go and learn what this means: 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" *Matthew 9:13.*

a. a more perfect way

Maybe the biggest problem with guilt is that it is not something to believe in. Rather, at best, it gives people something to believe against.

Paul recognized the problem inherent in a system that simply believes against things and follows the rules against them. In *I Corinthians 13:1-3*, he wrote:

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Jesus said that the Law could be summed up in two motivational ideas: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” *Matthew 22:37-39 (partial).* He also said “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” *Matthew 22:40.* Neither of these ideas can be kept as "legal" rules of conduct. Rather they are concepts of principle and character - a description of the underlying motivation that must exist for a life to glorify God.

The truth is that only service to God from love, as love is set out in I Corinthians 13, has value. Without selfless love, our lives and our churches are worthless, regardless of the rules we keep, the sacrifices we make, the lengths we go to to proclaim the gospel, the number of people we have in our sanctuaries, and the apparent power and charisma of our teaching and preaching.

But love of God and love of those around us will require some hard reevaluation of what we teach and how we interact with our society and its people.

1. giving up rights

“When Jesus said turn the other cheek, He didn't mean for us to be a doormat.” That statement is what we think and that's what we preach. We believe we have been placed in a free country by God with rights we have to defend or lose. We believe we should turn the other cheek unless someone hurts us really badly, or hurts our families. We believe we should litigate and politic and fight for our rights to pray in school, place scriptures in public places, and to assemble together in Jesus name.

Unfortunately for rights-based theology, the principles we have been given in scripture simply don't support defense of rights. Daniel did not fight to have the law changed that condemned him, he simply continued to serve God, and God received glory. Paul did not claim he had a right to preach Christ, he simply went to jail and sang about Him, and God received glory. Peter and James, when confronted by secular authority, didn't demand their rights under Jewish or Roman law. They simply kept preaching and gave their lives for the message, and God received glory. Stephen did not challenge the legality of the assembly that condemned him. He he told them that Jesus was the Messiah, and Stephen died, and *God received glory*.

When Jesus spoke His famous words about turning the other cheek, it was in the context of a longer discussion. It was a discussion that related very specifically to identification with God. Jesus said “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Selfless love is a fundamental identifier of those who are children of God. Without it, we become indistinguishable from the world. We need to come to terms with the fact that God may truly be calling us to be a “doormat.” Under the world's logic, Jesus is the model for ineffectiveness. He died brutally on a cross when He had in His power the capacity to obliterate His opposition. But under God's logic, Jesus was the ultimate success story for the same reason the world thought Him a fool.

So where does that leave us? Jesus concluded, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” He set the standard, and an impossible one at that, and then lived a life in which He met that standard. Jesus never defended His own rights. *See Matthew 26:39*. And then He challenged those who claim to be God's children to follow Him and emulate that life. *Luke 9:23*.

Turning the other cheek is not simply a rule for living, its an illustration of love and our fundamental identifier with the love Christ showed mankind. Are our rights more important, or is the person hitting us, holding us down, and restricting our freedom more important? If we love that person, our first and only concern should be “Christ and Him crucified.” Under those circumstances, love, both of Jesus and His mission for us, and for the individual causing us pain, requires that we keep being followers of Jesus in their lives . . . and maybe that we take the beating.

2. giving up scorekeeping

There are at least two ways of keeping score in the church, and they are both wrong. The first is to keep score of how many times people hurt us, or how many times they have gotten the better of us, or perhaps worst of all, how many times they have won and we have lost. Paul says love keeps no account of wrongs done. We simply can't love until we internalize that idea.

The second, more insidious method of score-keeping is measuring faith and loveability by “christian” accomplishment. When we look at promises in scripture, there are no rewards for fame, visibility, or the number of people who come to listen to us. The things God prizes are Love, Joy, Peace Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Gentleness, Faithfulness and Self-Control. *Galatians 5:22-23*. These are the fruits of the Spirit. It is by bearing much fruit that we glorify God. *John 15:8*. That has nothing to do with the externals that are beyond our control, (*I Corinthians 3:6*), and everything to do with how we determine to live our lives where we are. Regardless of who sees it or doesn't see it. No one has ever been a great man of faith *because* he had a large congregation or “won lots of people to Christ” or because he even spoke to more people about Jesus than someone else. Great men of faith are simply men of faith. They are men who live lives in pursuit of Jesus and His standards for success.

3. giving up judgment for self-evaluation

We have built a church culture that is designed to identify the “bad people.” It is one that looks at specific individuals, even those who are a part of our church, and decides “I don't want my kids hanging out with them.” We preach to our children that they should isolate themselves from people who are “bad influences” and find “good kids” to be their friends. And we adopt those same ideas in our own lives. We determine who the people are that are unacceptable, and we let them know they are not welcome. Even worse, we imply, or even state directly, that they don't deserve the love we have in Jesus.

Who the “bad” people are tends to depend on which sins we don't commit. It is very rare that we tell our children not to associate with people who gossip, even though the tongue “. . . is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James 3:7. Why? Because we gossip. We don't tell them not to hang out with people who love money, and in fact often hold those people up as respectable Christians, even though love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. I Timothy 6:10. Why? Because we love money, so we think that sin is just not that bad when compared to others.

The problem with all of our judgment of the severity of sin is that in truth, there are no “good kids” for our children to hang out with. There are no “good people” for us to associate with. There are only redeemed people and lost people, and we are called to meet them both where they are – the lost with love and the message of hope in Jesus, and the saved, regardless of where they come from, as new creations in Christ Jesus, our brothers and sisters in the family of God.

In real terms, this means your brother is the man on death row who has found Jesus. Your call is to love and share hope with the girl who had an abortion, the doctor who performed it, and the people who have defended her right to have it.

I heard a radio interview once with a girl who crossed a “christian” picket line at an abortion clinic, with people carrying signs and shouting at her that she was a murderer and deserved to die. Her response in the interview was “I would never become a Christian after what those people did to me.” Exactly what part of the mission Christ left us did those “christians” fulfill? How can we, who have

received so great a salvation claim she is undeserving of the same love and forgiveness we have received? *Matthew 18:21-35*. We need to stop concerning ourselves with “fixing” the sin of the world, something that is both beyond our capacity and our scope, and instead simply be salt and light. Know nothing but Christ and Him crucified. Love each other and love our enemies.

This is not to say we should not be hard on sin. We need to call out sin, correct sin, challenge sin where it lives IN OUR OWN LIVES. If we do that, then we can help our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ do the same. *Matthew 7:5*. But we have no right, authority or call to judge the world for its sin. *I Corinthians 5:12-13*.

There is no one who does good, not even one. Psalm 14:3b

b. faith, hope and love as core doctrine and loving Jesus as commitment

There is a tendency to view Love as a side effect of a Christian life, or as a good thing we should teach. It's not. Love is core Doctrine. We need to stop and ask ourselves why, when we draft our doctrinal statements for our churches, Faith, Hope and Love – the three enduring traits Christians are supposed to possess – do not appear in them. They are essential to our call, essential to our lives if they are to have value, and essential if we intend to actually follow Jesus in Spirit and in Truth. The church at Ephesus was specifically challenged in Revelation 2 because, even though it kept the faith and stood for truth, it had lost its original motivation for doing so. Jesus' message to that church fully demonstrates how important this issue is, because even though the church worked hard, challenged untruth and identified itself with Christ, its failure to act from a love of Jesus and loving motives toward others threatened to remove the base from which it spoke.

This discussion is not meant to imply that we should not teach our children Godly value systems. Indeed, it is imperative that we do so. What it is meant to challenge is how we motivate our children and each other to live by those value systems. We will only respond for so long to guilt – guilt that we don't have to carry because Jesus paid the price for it and carried it for us. But if we leave our children with Love of God and Love of others as the primary motivator for their lives, we have left them with something to hold on to. A purpose to believe in. And a hope of living lives that have eternal value.

Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep my commandments.” *John 14:15*. This scripture is taught more often than not as a standard of proof of love. In other words, we think it says that we prove we love Jesus by keeping His commandments. But maybe that's not what it is at all. Perhaps its not a scorecard we can hang our hats on and claim “i love Jesus more than others because i keep His commandments.” That attitude strikes me as being more like the Pharisee than the Publican. Maybe instead, what Jesus said was that if we love Him, if we commit to Him the same kind of love that is set out in I Corinthians 13, the natural outgrowth of that love will be the keeping of His commandments. Love is the key. Without it, keeping all the commandments you think you can is simply worthless. It is from Love of God, Jesus, our neighbors and our enemies that true obedience flows. Living in Christ's love is the only valid motivator for a Christian life. “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.” *Jesus. John 15:8-9*.

principle 6: value lives lived for Jesus

a. who is important?

How many of us know who Tiger Woods is? Probably almost all of us. How many of us know who George Bush is. Probably almost all again. But what about Dan Germann? Probably not so many of us. We all know what Tiger Woods and George Bush have done. Tiger has achieved fame and success in athletics, George Bush in politics. All Dan has done is devote his life to the mission of the cross in comparative obscurity. He is currently the director of New Tribes Mission's Africa Ministries. He also, in the wake of the murder of several of that ministry's missionaries, gave one of the most compelling defenses of the faith that has been made in the last 20 years. So the question is if we had an opportunity to have one of these three people come speak at our church about what is valuable in life, which one would we choose? Even more – which of the three do we want as a model of success for our children. If we answer honestly, the answer to that question tells us a lot about what we think is valuable in a human life.

In America, it is difficult for us to separate success from Christian success. We see people who are facilitating what we see as “good” in society – through politics, law, medicine, emergency services, serving their country in the military, and in many other ways – and we hold them up as “Godly” examples – not because they live lives of compassion, love, faith and discipleship, but because they are respectable and productive. We want to hear from them in our churches. We talk about them to our children. We give them places of honor in our assemblies. We say they are fulfilling the roles God has given them in society and honoring Him by doing it. Meanwhile, we take the person who was once a drug dealer and a thief, who then found Jesus and now devotes his life to the cause of Christ on the street or in prison, telling people about Jesus, giving what little he has to help those in need, and we hide from him. We live in fear that he might revert to his old life. We stand back from his tattoos, his rough exterior, and his gruff mannerisms. Most of all, we never, never, never consider him our true brother. We never invite him home for dinner. And yet, he is the definition of Christian success. Every day he lives for Christ he is validating the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross and the the Call God has placed in his life. Those we choose to honor are most often simply serving temporal ideas of good that have little or no eternal significance. We have lost all understanding of the concept of redemption. In fact, we don't even really believe in it.

I spent several of my professional years as an attorney representing men on death row. One of the most common comments I heard from believers was, “how can you represent those evil men.” I often asked people, “what about those men on death row who have found Jesus? Aren't they our brothers and shouldn't we be involved in their lives? And what about those who don't know Him. Shouldn't we show them mercy in hopes they would find Him?” The response I got most often was “I don't believe a murderer could really find Jesus in prison – they are just saying that so people will feel sorry for them.” We don't believe in redemption.

I have watched people who come to church as new believers. They don't act like they are “supposed to.” They don't dress like they are “supposed to.” And instead of treating them as if they are our baby brothers and sisters who need to grow, we attack. We deny the redemptive power of Jesus in their lives, and instead begin to gossip, to ostracize, and to isolate them because of the “harm” they might do to the lovely edifice of cold dead stone we are building. We don't believe in redemption.

b. what is important?

In Ecclesiastes chapter 1, Solomon wrote:

That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one might say,
"See this, it is new"?
Already it has existed for ages
Which were before us.
There is no remembrance of earlier things;
And also of the later things which will occur,
There will be for them no remembrance
Among those who will come later still.

If we choose to live lives like those described in Ecclesiastes, we are left with something very depressing indeed. There is no point to our labor. There is nothing new. There is not even any lasting value in the "good" we do. Part of what we miss about Jesus is the fact that He was the answer, not just to our sin, but to Solomon's depressive picture of what man could accomplish. "Nothing new under the sun?" In Christ we are a new creation, created for good works. *Ephesians 2:10, 2 Corinthians 5:17*. We have been freed, not just from the bondage of sin but from the bondage of useless lives. We are no longer bound to an unproductive existence for which there will be "no remembrance." *See II Peter 1:5-8*.

Jesus taught a lot about finding value in our lives. He said things like: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." *Matthew 6:24*. And "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." *Matthew 6:33*. Yet we persist in applying our own worldly value system to our lives and those of the people around us. We hear that you cannot serve both God and Money, and then we talk about "making time for Jesus" in our busy work days. There is no challenge in modern Christian discipleship. At most we are asked to find a place in our church organizations where we can "plug in." There is no critical presentation of what a truly valuable life would actually consist of.

Why do we temporize? Why do we leave ourselves wiggle room when we talk about the Call? The truth is that Jesus doesn't want time in our lives. He doesn't want us to plug in. He wants us to recognize the true bond-servant relationship He has already paid for in our lives. But we are afraid that if we talk about what following Jesus actually costs, many will reject the Way and return to the world. And we are correct. *See Matthew 13:1-18*. That makes the Truth no less true, though. What Jesus said was:

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple." *Luke 14:16*

"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." *Luke 9:62*.

Following Jesus is not simply going to church services, or even becoming “full-time” ministers. To truly follow Him, we must abandon our core value systems and let God replace them with His.

What would a follower of Jesus truly value if they had His value system? Here are some things that would be:

VALUABLE

Love and Compassion: Jesus was unequivocal about the underlying importance of these two ideas. His response to legalism was “But go and learn what this means: ' I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." *Matthew 9:13*.

People: One thing that was consistent about Jesus ministry is that it was purely about the people he had come to reach and save. Think for a moment about the staggering implications of the fact that the Way the Truth and the Life had time to sit and talk to Mary in her living room, went to lunch with Zaccheus, sat at the well and made friends with a woman of ruined reputation, lost sleep to meet with Nicodemus, and even looked down from the cross and asked John to take care of His mother.

The Message of Jesus: Paul said “I resolved to know nothing among you but Christ and Him crucified.” That means Paul had no political opinions, no opinions on finance and business, no allegiance to any cause but that of the message of Christ.

A pure heart and the fruits of the spirit: Jesus said “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples” *John 15:8*. That fruit is not defined in numbers of people who come to Jesus, but instead in the reflection of His characteristics and value system in our lives. *See Galatians 5:22-25*.

Communion with God: The example Jesus set was one of constant prayer. Paul says “Pray without ceasing.” This is not prayer for stuff, or healing, or even mission. It is a constant communication with God about life and purpose. And yet we have built a church culture in which prayer is an afterthought.

Truth: The book of Mark alone contains at least fifteen instances in which Jesus began a statement with the words. “I tell you the truth . . .” If we are to follow His example, we can do no less. Paul wrote in I Corinthians that Love “rejoices with the truth.” “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” *Ephesians 4:14-15*.

The freedom to actually serve Jesus from pure motivation: A follower of Jesus recognizes the awful life from which he has been freed. No longer in bondage to sin means that we can make choices that have good outcomes. Our Liberty is the freedom to actually choose things of value – to actually do good.

The Call itself: The Bible records a truly unusual incident in the fifth chapter of Luke. It says that:

And He [Jesus] got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the people from the boat. When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets." When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break; so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men." When they had brought their boats to land, **they left everything and followed Him.**

Mercy: In Micah, it is written:

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

There are also things a true follower of Jesus would not have any concern for or give any value to. Paul wrote "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ." Philippians 3:8. These things are:

WORTHLESS

Political power: Jesus repeatedly rejected political power when it was offered. Satan tempted Him with it in the wilderness. The people of Jerusalem attempted to confer it on him when he rode into the city and they laid palm branches in His path. He told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." John 18:16. There is not a single example in the New Testament of any follower of Jesus, apostle or otherwise, making a statement about the politics of his day.

Money: Paul wrote, "Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Jesus took extreme positions on money as a life focus, including telling the rich ruler to give up everything he had. Jesus answered one potential follower with the truth that Jesus was homeless, and challenged Judas' anger at the waste of perfume worth over a year's wages on anointing His feet.

Fame and Position (even in church): Jesus said we should not call ourselves leaders or teachers with authority. Matthew 23:10. He consistently elevated servants above masters and leaders in the kingdom. Mark 10:43.

Authority: No true follower of Jesus would ever seek authority. Why? Because Jesus is the only authority there is. All authority is given to Him in heaven and in earth. Matthew 28:18. We have no right to claim authority from God over any person. All we have is mission and truth. Our human search for authority for ourselves in scripture consistently leads to error and conflict.

Security: We are often focused on our own security, fearful of the outcome of living a life that is truly focused on following Jesus. And yet Jesus said, “For this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.” We have to come to terms with the fact that in any event, we are fundamentally incapable of keeping ourselves safe. Either God keeps us safe or we have no safety at all.

His own Rights: Jesus said that “[i]f anyone wants to sue you and take your **shirt**, let him have your coat also.” How different our witness might be if we committed to resolving our societal conflicts this way.

c. discipleship as a core doctrine

If we are going to truly serve Jesus on His terms - if we are going to glorify God by bearing fruit - we must abandon ownership not just of our lives, but of our value system. We have to quit focusing on perceived calls to missions or full-time ministry, and realize that there is only one call and it is made to each of us. Take up your cross and come follow Jesus.

In Philippians, Paul asked that the Church “make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.” *Philippians 2:2*. We know our purpose. Jesus gave it to us in Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28. Until we commit to the long view - that Godly value is found in the people we reach for Christ and love and disciple - we will build worldly churches, intent on many purposes and committed to none.

principle 7: acknowledge the power

I cannot count the number of times I have sat in church meetings and heard discussions of marketing principles; surveys on church growth, and on the necessity of building, programming, and worshiping in a way that will attract people to church. I'm not sure what we think we are about, but it looks like we are trying to sell a product or build a club. I have more than once sat in meetings on building new facilities and heard that a building that is at 80 percent of capacity is "full" and that no one else will come until we build a bigger or prettier one. I have heard that our churches will not grow until we have parking lots, clean bathrooms, and family life centers. And I'm afraid we have no concept of who we are in relation to God's plan for us.

a. bringing people to church or bringing them to Jesus?

At the core of our thought process is a failure to understand that lost people cannot come to church and that our mission is not to bring them to church. The church, by definition, is God's people. Until we recognize the gulf that exists between believers and non-believers, we can never truly offer non-believers hope. They can't "come" to church, because there is no place to "come." Church simply IS, and unbelievers cannot truly be a part of it. They must first come to Jesus. Yet we try to bring people "in" by presenting, not a message of Jesus, but instead a message of "a great church, with powerful preaching, wonderful people, and a dynamic youth program." In an attempt to justify our lack of interests in people's lives, we claim to be trying to bring them to "church" where the "preacher" can tell them about Jesus. We never recognize our own mission to be and speak Jesus in their lives where they are. There are many reasons for this mindset, including these four common ones:

First, many times we are not really trying to build a church out of new believers at all, but instead out of "church people." We have no interest in the lost because they have problems. If they come to Jesus they have to be raised into mature believers, and that's a lot of work. It's much easier (and much less loving) to simply try to find people who already fit the mold of what we think "church people" should look like and try to show them that we are more attractive than some other group of believers. Yet God's plan for church growth relies exclusively on building that church from new believers. *See Acts 2:47.*

Second, we have no faith in the power of the message. We don't truly believe that the message of Jesus is enough to cut through the cynicism of our modern world. We look for ways to prove to unbelievers that we can provide the "community" they lack. We entice them with activities that compete with the world's entertainment. And we soft-sell the fact that sooner or later they will have to come to terms with the serious problems in their lives and their own responsibility in their lives for sin. We hope they will like us enough that when they finally hear the message of Jesus that it won't offend them. But it is a message that is entirely about offense. *Romans 9:33, Matthew 10:34-36.* And it is because of this offense that the power of God is required before its truth can be accepted in anyone's life. Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." *John 6:44.* Yet we try everything except seeking that power in our attempts to reach people and bring them to "church."

The message of Jesus is one that must be planted in love in the lives of people where they are. We see no increase in our churches from the lost world because we have abandoned God's plan for that increase. We do not present the message of Jesus in the world, instead holding it to ourselves in our comfortable church buildings. We do not challenge one another to live in love for those around us. Love that, as it grows, will compel us to tell them the Truth regardless of the consequences to us.

Third, we want to build something for ourselves. Church has far too often become about building a monument to ourselves and our purported faith, or about building a comfortable place for us to hang out. A recent sign said that a core purpose of the church was to provide a comfortable place for the "convenience of the faithful." If we cannot see the problem with that statement, we may truly be hopeless. We make our choices in expending resources and effort based on what we want, and what we rationalize that we need, not on what the mission needs or on what the people around us need. Benevolence is an afterthought. Mission is often ignored entirely. We do not have because we do not ask. We ask and do not receive, because we ask with wrong motives, so that we may spend it on our pleasures. *James 4:2(b)-3*. Love fails in us because all we have is love of self.

Fourth, we lack patience. Paul wrote in I Corinthians, "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth." If we were willing to serve and witness on God's terms, without a need for self-affirmation from visible numbers or success, we could have confidence that the word we planted would produce fruit in God's time, not our own. But instead, we define success or failure of ministry, not in terms of faithfulness and perseverance, but in terms of numbers. We don't see God act because we want to play God.

b. the power of a witness

The church has been collectively entrusted with two ideas of great spiritual power. The first of these is the message of what Jesus did on the cross. He changed the destiny of mankind and gave us the freedom to reconnect with God and remake the choice in which Adam failed. He bought us with the highest price conceivable. This message has tremendous power. Jesus said that if He was lifted up, He would draw all men to Himself. But it is not the only weapon we have in the spiritual battle we fight in this world. There is a second, equally powerful idea. In Revelation, John said: "I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." *Revelation 12:10-11a*.

When we actually do tell people about Jesus, we generally do so in an expositional form. We read them Bible verses and tell them what they mean (the "Roman Road" for instance). Or, we illustrate God's plan to them, through tracts or visual tools like evangecube. There is nothing wrong with these things, and when we evangelize this way, we cover the first half of what overcame the powers of this world - the blood of the Lamb. But this is not "the word of our testimony." That word is what makes our message real and powerful. It's our personal statement of our own experience of how God changed our lives through Jesus.

The Apostle Peter wrote, "but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. . . " *II Peter 3:15*. Peter didn't write that we should give the reason that anyone can have hope in Christ. He wrote that we should give the reason WE have hope in Him. When Jesus left His disciples, He left them with a statement of purpose. He told them "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." *Acts 1:8*.

So what is a witness? A witness is someone who can reliably speak about an event because they have seen or experienced it first hand. For those of us who have believed in Jesus, we have seen and experienced the restoration of a broken relationship with God, the transformation into new creatures that comes from God's Spirit living in us, the sense of purpose and mission that we have in this life, and the hope that comes from assurance of life eternal. If we are going to be what Jesus has called us to be - His witnesses - we have to tell people about this knowledge we have of our relationship with Christ, and about the change He brought to our lives.

c. following God's plan

God has given us a clear plan for building the church of Jesus Christ. It is not a plan of marketing or of personal glory. It is instead a plan of redemption. Until we as a people become focused on one purpose, not just the salvation, but the **redemption** of the lives of people around us, we will never find the fulfillment of that plan in our churches. We have to see the value of what they can become as new creations in Christ. We have to reach them in love, relying on the power of God in presenting the message, and help them grow when they come to Jesus.

The really interesting thing is that if we gave up our own rights, our own quests for personal recognition, gave up trying to market ourselves, we would find that we talked about Jesus better and more creatively. We would find that what type of music we used to praise Him didn't matter too much, so long as we praise. We would find that we helped people out of love, not competition. We would find that we would reach people for Jesus in our lives instead of trying to bring them to church, the one place they can't go without Him. We would find all of those things that a "successful church" has; community, outreach, love, truth. But we would also find that it was God who received the glory from them, not us.

There is a way that seems right to a man. . . *Proverbs 14:12*.

principle 8: listen and wait

a. the myth of the open door

I am reluctant to challenge a specific single theology, particularly since it is not any one theology that is the bane of Christian existence. Rather, it is Theology itself that hinders us. The idea that we can apply human logic to God, that we can reduce Him to a science or a philosophy defined by man is not simply the most arrogant thing we could do, but supremely dangerous as well. Three noted theologians in Job's time found themselves in need of Job's personal intervention before God in order that God "may not do with you according to your folly, because you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has." When we determine that we can make authoritative pronouncements on God and His will that are based, not on His revelation, but on our own supposed deep study and intellectual understanding of Him, we walk on dangerous ground indeed.

With that said, there is one single theology that pervades modern Christianity and consistently destroys mission, lives, and commitment. It is the theology of the "open door." What is remarkable about "open-door" theology is that we expect God to speak to us through circumstance while at the same time denying His capacity to speak to us directly. Open-door theology goes something like this:

- We are in a certain location, job, mission, or relationship.
- Something about our environment becomes difficult. We are persecuted, or money runs tight, or we get in a fight with someone, or we simply get bored.
- We decide unilaterally that God wants us to do something different.
- Suddenly a "door" opens to a new opportunity that would give us more money, an apparently better working environment, a more "successful" ministry, or a "better" church than the one we currently work in, or even a better marriage.
- We "feel" like going through that door is what God wants us to do.
- We act on that feeling without confirmation from God, often in the face of brothers and sisters telling us that God does not wish for us to make the choice. We often act in the face of clear scriptural direction to the contrary. In so doing, we think nothing of breaking trusts and commitments. We destroy relationships, and we consistently cut off God's plans without seeing them to completion.

If there is any pattern of Christian behavior that crosses all denominational lines, this is it. Some may embrace it more than others, but few are willing to challenge it. Unfortunately, this mode of decision-making flies in the face of many clear truths.

1. Jesus does not call us to a comfortable path. We are called to be witnesses in a world that will not welcome us with open arms. Jesus said that we are blessed "when men **hate** you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the **sake** of the Son of Man." *Luke 6:22*. The message of Jesus by its nature is divisive (*Matthew 10:34*) and we cannot assume that the easiest path of ministry is the one God wants us to pursue. If we are dealing with lost people, conflict is an inherent part of that process. Those who are most rigidly opposed to us may be exactly who God is dealing with and wants us to speak to. Just think of Paul before his conversion. When the road gets

hard, God calls us not to seek an open door out, but to perseverance.

2. We cannot trust what we feel. "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" *Jeremiah 17:9* We simply cannot trust what we feel emotionally, particularly when it challenges clear direction we have previously received from God. Paul ran the gamut of contentment to complete depression about his ministry, but it never affected his choice to persevere in the mission to which he had been called. Paul said he was "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." *II Corinthians 4:8-10*. We have to come to terms with the fact that God's path for our lives may at times look like this.

3. God has a consistent pattern of speaking to His people clearly. Jesus did not leave us with ambiguous or difficult to understand direction for our lives. He called us to love, witness and live for Him. In *Acts 13:1*, the Holy Spirit very clearly told the teachers and prophets in the church in Jerusalem exactly who to send on mission and how. James wrote that "if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." Open door theology denies the ability of God to speak directly to our hearts and minds about His plans for us, and instead relies on our interpretation of the winds of life. That is not wisdom. *James 1:5-6*.

4. God will not call us to an action contrary to His clear word. There are several things that we know about the call Jesus has placed in each of our lives. We know that we are each called to be a witness. *Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:18-20*. We know that at least one clear element of God's will is that people come to repentance. *II Peter 3:9*. We know that we are called to live lives that bear fruit for the purpose of bringing glory to God. *John 15:8, Galatians 5:22-23*. We know that we are to abandon self-interest in favor of love. *Galatians 5:25, Philippians 2, John 15:12-13*. We know that we are called to be servants, not leaders. *Matthew 23:1-12*.

God says in *Malachi 3:6* that "I the Lord do not change . . ." We cannot find God's will in actions and choices that violate His principles, even if we "feel led" to make those choices.

5. Our lives are validated by faith, not works, or even visible results. Faith requires a reliance on God's promises, even if we do not see those promises fulfilled in a short time. The men of faith listed in Hebrews 11 lived in reliance on God's promise, even though they did not see it in their lifetimes. *Hebrews 11:39-40*. Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have **seen** Me, have you **believed**? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet **believed**." *John 20:29*. We need to recognize that God is going to call us to choices in our lives that rely, not on earthly wisdom, but on His providence and plan. A plan that we, like Elijah hiding in his cave, may not see until God chooses to reveal to us the real impact our perseverance and obedience has made on the world around us.

b. learning to listen

If there is one thing that is characteristic of those who have successfully followed God and served Him throughout history, it is that they listened. "I will hear what God the LORD will say; For He will speak peace to His people, to His godly ones; But let them not turn back to folly." *Psalms 85:8*. Indeed, the primary call of the Old Testament prophets to Israel was to HEAR the word of the Lord. *Jeremiah 2:4, Ezekiel 16:35, Amos 3:1, Micah 1:2*, etc. . . . Jesus consistently challenged His listeners with the phrase "He who has ears, let him hear." *Matthew 11:15, 13:9, 13:43*.

Instead though, our relationships with God in our modern world seem to be most often defined by us talking - telling God what we need, what we want, and what we want Him to do. Rarely in those conversations do we even seriously request that God's plans be fulfilled. At most we say, "please give me what I want if it's your will." And yet the model prayer Jesus gave His disciples is defined by a recognition of a different relationship. *Matthew 6:9-13*. It begins with a recognition of who God is and of His right to control our lives and provide for us on His terms. It recognizes our dependence on Him and His right to judge. Its entire focus is God's kingdom and His will. In seriously praying for God's will, Jesus was consistent with this idea. He prayed in the garden "my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." *Matthew 26:39*.

We need to come to God as servants, and in recognition of that servant relationship, say "here am I, send me." *Isaiah 6:8* And then we need to listen. If we do, God will speak to us clearly. There was no doubt in the minds of the teachers and prophets in the early church that they were to send Paul and Barnabas on mission, because God spoke. Interestingly, it was when they were fasting and seeking God's will that He spoke. More than that, they were "ministering" to Him. They were in unity in recognizing their servant relationship to God, and were waiting in expectation of His direction.

Jesus said, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." *John 15:7*. If this doesn't seem to be true in our lives, it is simply because of the first part - we don't live solely in Christ. We try to live in ourselves, seeking our own desires and interests, not God's. James said "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." *James 4:3*.

c. abandoning earthly wisdom

There is another characteristic of men that have fulfilled God's will. When He spoke, they ultimately acted on His direction, despite the apparent foolishness of doing so. There is nothing wrong with asking questions of God about His plans, and we have repeated examples of men of faith doing just that. Moses, Gideon, Job. All questioned God. They even asked Him to confirm His direction. But ultimately, all were faithful and obedient, even though they did not understand. Paul writes that God's wisdom is foolish to men. *I Corinthians 1:20*. Jesus says that with God "all things are possible." *Matthew 19:25-27*. Part of listening is accepting direction. If we come to God with servant hearts, and act on what we hear, we can be servants in spirit and truth.

d. the unbelievable

If we as assemblies were to begin to pray on these terms; if we would take time in silence to seek God's will and His plans together, we might find the impossible. Consensus. Paul said to the Philippians, "by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." *Philippians 2:2*. Jesus prayed for that for us in the garden. "I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me." *John 17:23*. Unity is possible - on God's terms.

"If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to the prayer offered in this place." *2 Chronicles 7:13-15*.

principle 9: don't lie

a. who are we?

Who are you? We are asked that question every time we meet someone new. Every time we change jobs, houses, schools. The question is implicit in the dance of information exchange we engage in with every other human being we have contact with. In response to that question, we can do one of two things. Tell the truth . . . or lie.

In answering that question, perhaps the thing we as followers of Jesus struggle with most is the conflict within between our old selves, and the new creation we have become in Jesus. In our lives, we are often called on to identify ourselves by what we do, what we belong to, or who we are married or related to. At a party, a celebration, or a business function, someone will come up and say, "so, what do you do?" Our first reaction is to go to our most important sub-conscious title - the way we think of ourselves most often. We might say "I'm an attorney" or "I'm a firefighter" or even "I'm a pastor" or "I'm a Baptist," or a "Methodist." We might instead say, "I'm married to _____" or "I'm _____'s mother." We might even say "I work at _____, but what I really like to do is build boats, or play golf, or climb mountains."

What we almost never say in response to the questions "what do you do" or "who are you" is "I follow Jesus." Why? Because we have never come to terms with the fact that being a Follower of Jesus is the real identity that God has called us to. Even worse, we have never come to terms with what we are really saying about Jesus when we don't identify ourselves that way.

When Jesus said that "[w]hoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. . .", *Matthew 10:32*. He was not simply talking about living a clean life, or going to church. He was talking about the deep human commitments that define our lives.

How many of us have had a "friend" who would do things with us when we were alone, and would even confide in us, but who, when in the presence of other people, would maintain distance and never acknowledge that they knew us? How did we view that "friend's" actions? Yet that's what we do with Jesus on far too many occasions. We go to church and acknowledge Him where we know people will not be offended by the fact we are friends with Jesus. But when it comes to telling people publicly about our relationship, or putting our name on a story that sets out how wonderful that relationship is, we get nervous, fearful, and even embarrassed.

In most instances "Follower of Jesus" is not the primary way we want people to think about us. We want them to be impressed by our accomplishments, and our standing in the community. Most of all, we want them to like us, and we are all too aware of the fact that Jesus is a "stumbling stone and a Rock of offense."

And so, when it comes to identifying ourselves, we lie. We LIE. We try to present a picture of ourselves to the world that is compatible with the world's value systems. And yet, that is not who we are. Paul wrote that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." *II Corinthians 5:17*. This means that in truth, we are no longer creatures of the world's value system, but instead citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, tied to its values and its mission. When we present ourselves as creatures of the world, we misrepresent who we are, and mislead those around us.

b. the problem with the word "Christian"

If we accept our identity as follower of Jesus, then we have to also accept the servant relationship it entails. As a follower of His, we no longer have a right to define our own life on our own terms. Instead we are bound by the calling He has placed on us. *Galatians 1:10*. That calling requires several things that make us very uncomfortable - things that we often shade truth to avoid. The most important thing it calls us to is to be a witness. *Acts 1:8*. It is our discomfort with this call that leads us most often to rely on labels instead of complete disclosure in telling people who or what we are. Paul wrote:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

I Corinthians 9:19-23. Even if there may be some disagreement about the nature of Paul's "becoming all things" there is one thing that is absolutely clear about how Paul related to others. His motivation. Paul's intention in dealing with all other people was to relate to them in such a way as to allow him to have a conversation with them about who Jesus was. His goal was to reveal fully who Jesus was in his life, and he was willing to subordinate fear, self-interest, and appearance for the sake of that message. The question we have to answer is what is our purpose in our own relationships?

Think for a minute about the differences in response you receive in America today if you identify yourself as a "Follower of Jesus" instead of a "Christian." You'll even get different responses to these two identifications from brothers and sisters in Christ. Even more so, think about the response of the world if you call yourself a "Follower of Jesus" instead of a "Baptist."

Most people in America today have a picture of what a "Christian" is. There are shirts that say "Republican heterosexual family oriented pro-life Christian" and lead people to believe that one has to be all of those things before one can be reconciled to God. Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn and many others tell America that being Christian is simply about getting all you can from God in your life, and that we are all Christians if we just send them money. Many Americans believe that everyone from Jehovah's Witnesses, to Christian Muslims to Mormons to Unitarians are "Christians" because they acknowledge that Christ existed in some form or other. Large numbers of people believe that Christians are simply rule-keepers who claim to be justified by keeping God's rules. Similar problems apply to many other labels that don't have anything to do with Jesus like "Baptist" "Fundamentalist" "Evangelical."

What is lacking from those preconceptions in each case are the fundamentals of what we are, or at least what we should be: people of faith, sinners saved by grace and not self-justification, and people who serve Christ on His terms for His purposes. The term "Christian" was originally applied to believers by outsiders to signify that we were people who believed exactly those things. *Acts 11:26*. But that is not the term they would apply now. The phrase in American culture that probably most closely captures the idea that "Christian" was originally designed to embody is "Jesus-Freak." My point is that if you tell people you are a "Follower of Jesus," more often than not, you get to have a conversation about those things. If you tell them you are a "Christian" or a "Baptist" you don't. So the question we have to ask ourselves is whether we want the conversation.

It is not my intention to be dogmatic about the label "Follower of Jesus." I can foresee an environment in which that claim could be dismissed as easily as a claim to be a "Christian" currently is. There are other identifiers that evoke the same types of responses that "Follower of Jesus" does. And they are equally true. For instance, we are "Citizens of the Kingdom of God," "Children of God," "Redeemed," "Brothers and Sisters in Christ," and many other things that clearly relate to who we really are. There are parts of the world today where "Christian" means exactly what we want it to mean. How we identify ourselves may depend heavily on the culture in which we live. What I am saying, though, is that it is imperative that we examine our motives in deciding how we identify ourselves. Are we doing so in order to clearly establish our belief in Jesus and our reliance on Him as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, or are we doing so knowing that people will place us in a preconceived category and dismiss us without ever asking what we mean so we don't have to give an answer for the Hope we have?

c. can we actually claim to be "followers of Jesus?"

Commitment. It is the word we avoid at all costs. There is a problem with identifying ourselves so closely with Jesus, not just as people who sort of believe in Him, but as his followers. The problem is that we are telling people that He is what we are. That we are committed, not to our own causes, but His. That we have pledged "our lives, our flag, and our sacred honor" to the purposes of the kingdom. When Jesus looked at Matthew at his tax collectors booth, "He said to him, 'Follow Me!' And he got up and followed Him." *Matthew 9:9*. We have the same challenge in our lives, and it will cost as much if we accept it.

Pursuing the cause of Christ does not lead to popularity, power, or even a lot of friends. Jesus divides. He alienates. He is a stumbling stone and a rock of offense. If we are committed to His purposes, His desires, then we are also committed to being persecuted. To conflict even within our families. Does this mean we will find ourselves standing alone? I don't know. Possibly. Elijah found himself standing alone before Israel. When Joshua said, "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" he didn't know if anyone would come with him. Paul found himself in prison in Rome with no one standing beside him. If we cannot come to terms with the possibility, then we have not come to terms with commitment. It is no wonder we shy away from identifying ourselves too closely.

What, exactly, was Peter asked when he denied Christ? He was asked "You are not also one of His disciples, are you?" He denied it, and said, "I am not." *John 18:25*. This was a question about Peter's basic commitments, his personal devotion, as it were. He was not asked if he knew Jesus, or even if he spent a lot of time with people who did. He was asked specifically if he was one of Jesus' followers. This isn't even the same question as "are you a church member." We all know many people who become "members" of church bodies for many reasons that have nothing to do with following Jesus. What the people asking the question of Peter wanted to know was what he, personally, was committed to. At that point in his life, they, and he, discovered that he was committed to very little.

This is not to attack Peter. He resolved his issues of commitment and became a powerful voice for Truth. His story is left in scripture as a challenge to our own claimed commitments. We ask people to be "committed" church members, to work in service to the church, but we never ask them to evaluate their basic spiritual commitments. What would we be willing to die for? Or more importantly, to live for? We will never know whether we can truly claim to be followers of Jesus until we challenge ourselves and our assemblies to ask those questions.

Jesus said "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. *Matthew 19:21*.

d. the church and identity

Understanding identity and commitment is essential if we as assemblies are going to be effective. It is simply too easy for us to be dismissed or considered irrelevant in the world we live in. In a very real sense, to be truly effective witnesses, we are going to have to embrace the labels the world puts on us when we challenge it with truth. We must be intolerant, not of people, but of untruth. We must be narrow-minded, refusing to identify ourselves with any thing but the Way that is Jesus. We must be stubborn, stubbornly loving those who hate us. We must be foolish by the worlds standards, relying on God in our weakness instead of trying to build positions of strength.

principle 10: embrace faith

a. abandoning religion and liturgy

Jesus once said to the Pharisees, "Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers." *John 11:46*. They lived their lives by rules, carefully presenting themselves as model rules-followers. What they lacked was faith, compassion and principle. We, as they, tend toward rules as the easiest method of appearing to be approved by God. We far too often consider ourselves holy, not because we are covered by the blood of Jesus, but because we are "good people." It is this recurring mindset in Christianity that has led throughout centuries to the elevation of liturgy and religious practice over the reality of faith. It has affected us at even the most basic levels of the christian message - salvation.

From "confirmation" in many protestant churches, to formulaic "if you are baptized you are saved, or if you are a member of our church you are saved" ideas, to manipulative altar calls with "raise your hand and pray after me" invitations, we have attempted to co-opt the process of faith and make it quantifiable. We tell people, "if you prayed that prayer then God has saved you." In our impatience and fear we take short-cuts to salvation, trying to make people respond right now. Never recognizing the need for an act of God in drawing them to faith in Him. *John 6:44*. In doing so, we have not so much created a short-cut to salvation in many peoples lives as we have short-circuited their path to faith. I fear that we sit in church buildings full of people who walked an aisle and prayed a prayer and have never, never come to terms with their need for faith in Jesus. People who are simply lost and have never realized their personal responsibility to deal with their broken relationship with God.

Faith is difficult to quantify. It defies clear definition. We cannot teach someone how to believe. And that is the beauty of the call we have been given. Faith and belief require a direct conversation between a person and God. God is the author of the relationship, not us. When Paul said "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth," it was not simply a statement about jealousy in the church. It was a recognition by Paul of the limited part he played in the process of salvation.

I am not saying that there is no place for evangelism. Evangelism is essential. We need to preach Jesus on the streets, in the shopping malls, on the Internet. In every public forum we can find. But I am saying we have no power to force salvation. If people are truly going to come to Christ in faith, it is going to require more than altar calls, emotional pleas for repentance, and pattern prayers. It is going to require discussion. Hard questions. A witness of what faith is in our own lives. A willingness to put up with misdirection, irrelevancy, anger, personal attacks, and even obscenity from those who are seeking to find faith for themselves. Enough love to tell the truth and take the hits. Paul understood that although today might be the day of repentance, in many people's lives it's just going to take longer. He told Agrippa, "I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains." *Acts 26:29*. Evangelism is not about "closing the deal." It is about faithfulness to the message and faith that God will act on it *in HIS time*.

b. making disciples in a modern world

"Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart." *Jeremiah 29:12-13.*

Disciples become disciples because Jesus is the answer to a search in their own lives. A search we are called to facilitate. We spend too much time selling ourselves and not enough challenging people to openly seek God. Listen to any defense of atheism and you will find a discussion of "proofs that God does not exist." What you will not find is an atheist who has ever asked God openly and honestly "do you exist?" And this failure to look is what we have to expose in peoples' lives if we are to reach them. The world today spends most of its time coming up with new and creative ways to avoid addressing the fact that it could ask God if He is real and if Jesus is the truth. It drinks and drugs and sexes itself into blissful oblivion. It fascinates itself with its intellectualism and education and abandons critical thinking and self-examination in favor of popularity and polling data. It makes pseudo-science its religion, and denies the reality and inevitability of death. What we have to overcome in modern evangelism is the world's self-induced blindness.

The key to making disciples is challenging people's core assumptions about who they are and how they relate to the world around them. It is challenging their value systems. It is challenging them to ask the questions they are avoiding. And it is about trusting God to honor their search. This is what Jesus did. From the rich young ruler's self-justification to Zaccheus' sense that he was past being savable, to the woman at the well's blissful and willful ignorance, Jesus broke down people's assumptions about what they were and what God was and challenged them to look honestly. This is what Paul did. He didn't prove God's existence to the men of Athens. He simply invoked their pride in their own purported intellectual honesty and asked them to look at the possibility that God and Jesus might be true.

If we are going to make disciples in a "post-modern" world, the key is not emergent, mushy "we just want people to love us" community building. If we are going to truly love people, we have to love enough to recognize that until they find Jesus they aren't going to like us very much. It is also not simply hell-fire and brimstone. People say Jesus talked about hell a lot, and this is true. He talked a lot about hell to religious leaders. And he preached about hell in the sermon on the mount. But he always talked about hell, not in terms of specific sin, but in terms of underlying motivation. Hell requires a discussion of who we are and how we defy God. Telling people they are going to Hell because they drink, commit adultery, and lie won't cut it. If we are going to talk about sin and condemnation, it is necessary that we talk about what sin really is - a determination to defy God and be god in our own lives. It is necessary that we openly and honestly recognize our own defiance in that discussion. It is something that goes far beyond simply breaking rules. Something that implicates us all. Otherwise, we are simply saying to people that "your life isn't good enough and mine is so I can attack you."

c. the Call and the cost

If we are going to teach and live faith, there is one more thing that is required. The Call. The fact that past salvation, Jesus actually calls us to become bond-servants, giving up self-interest and worldly values for the kingdom. Recognizing God's ownership of our possessions, our employment, our families, of everything we are, and the fact that anything we own, any position we hold, anything we have is His to require of us at His pleasure. That we no longer have a right to our own desires, but that the only desires that should control our lives are those of Jesus. We sit in churches full of believers who live in limbo between their salvation and a point at which they either choose to follow Jesus with their lives or walk away. We keep them there because we fear they will walk away if they see the real cost of following Jesus. And so they remain useless for the kingdom because they lack any personal commitment to the mission. We can't talk about faith if we haven't applied any in our own lives. We can't claim to be followers of Jesus if we have not evaluated the cost to ourselves. And so we consistently fail to complete what we start, and Jesus is ridiculed as a result. *Luke 14:26-30.*

conclusion: our desire

It may be that you have read this letter, gotten to the end, and said "I already knew all of that." I don't doubt that for some readers that will be the case. The issue though, is not what we know is true. It is whether we act on what we know is true. Do we live it and teach it, uncompromisingly? Do we love our brothers and sisters enough to overcome the fear of its impact? James said "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin." *James 4:17*. The question is not what we know, but what we live.

Are we committed to Jesus. To serving Him on His terms? Or are we still doing what Adam, Eve, and Cain did? Being gods ourselves. Following our own paths, and choosing our own terms of justifying ourselves before God? Are our lives and our churches defined by a search for authority for ourselves, for self-justification at the expense of others; or are they defined by love, justice, mercy, truth and service to Jesus and one another?

I fear that the community of the saints in Sheridan is defined by our own arrogance, and not by love. We live in a community in which the body of Christ is fragmented. In which each group of believers follows its own chosen man, who is lord of his own domain until the group decides they are tired of him and gets a new king for themselves. There is no Godly basis for this. We are brothers and sisters with the same call, and yet we serve apart. We compete for religious precedence. We really can't even work together. There's no love in that.

In the last prayer Jesus lifted up for us before He gave His life for us, Jesus expressed the desire of His heart for believers. That we would be unified in Him. Jesus prayed that "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me." The Truth is that God's plan for our lives, and for those of the believers in other bodies that we currently find ourselves separated from, is unity.

This doesn't mean that we can compromise truth, faith, hope, or love, and it may seem that because of this, unity in our current world is an impossibility. But with God, nothing is impossible. We need to conform our desires to those of Jesus. We need to desire unity even with those brothers and sisters who have strayed far from the mission and message of Jesus. We need to apply the same principles to the brothers and sisters who are not a part of our particular group that we seek to apply to each other: love, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, and a desire to be servants, not leaders. We can't make fun, or belittle, or be bitter, or become stumbling blocks for our own selfish interests. The only stumbling block that should exist in our lives, and in theirs, is Jesus. We need to pray, as Jesus did, for unity in purpose, desire and mission. We need a vision of a larger unified church community intent on one purpose. We need to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified. If this were truly the desire of our hearts and prayers, we might wake up one day to find only one church around us. The Church of Jesus Christ at Sheridan, or as Paul would put it "the saints who are at Sheridan and who are faithful in Christ Jesus." We need our brothers and sisters to be our family.

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:2-8.

Your brother in Christ,

Jeremy B. Lowrey
April 25, 2008 - Sheridan, Arkansas

APPENDIX - MY STORY

I'm forty-two years old, and an attorney, and I've known Jesus for 30 years. I can easily say I would not have survived without Christ in my life as a comforter, a hope, and a purpose for living. I met Him when I was twelve. I had grown up hearing about Him - my grandfather was a Baptist preacher, and my parents always took me to church and they often talked to me about Jesus. But as I sat in my grandfather's study at Canaan Missionary Baptist Church, I realized that I didn't really know Jesus. At that point in my life, the separation that existed between God and me was the only thing I could think of. Probably because I spend most of my life writing, my view of my personal faith has always had a narrative component to it. I tend to think of faith in descriptive terms. To me it felt as if I was simply falling away from God, without hope. And then I saw that Jesus was the lifeline for me. I could reach out and take His hand, and He would not just keep me from falling, but would create a relationship between me and God. However it is described, at that point in my life, I called out to God, trusted Christ, and believed. And Jesus began to change who I was. One of the best things about Jesus is that when you meet Him, it's not the end of the story, it's the beginning of an incredible new one. One that ultimately will end with those who believe standing before Him in heaven, safe and secure in His love forever. But that is not even the end of the story in my life up until now. . .

Although I accepted Christ at 12, and I grew up in church, it was not until I was eighteen that I can really say that I became a follower of Jesus. I knew He had paid the price for my sin, and that I was His child, but it wasn't until then that I really saw what He was calling me to be. At that point in my life I was a fairly confused and self-centered teenager - typical freshman in college. But God brought people into my life who began to show me that God wanted more from me than lip-service and church attendance. These people seemed kind of strange based on my prior experiences. They sought to focus on God's will in their lives in everything they did. Looking back, I can see that they were flawed human beings just as I am, but at the time, all I could see was Christ living through them. And that is one of the neatest lessons I have ever learned - that Jesus can work through us, past our flaws and our sin, and make us relevant in the lives of people around us. To the people who were directly faithful in my life - Dawn, Rob, Carol, Mike, Kay, Charlie, Donna, Steve, Robin, and to all the others who lived around me in that time period, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude for the way that God used them to speak to me. Another neat thing about following Jesus is that God gives you people to look to as examples - people who have figured out some of the things you are struggling with, and who can pray with you and speak truth into your life. And that is what they remain for me, even though it has been many years since I have been in contact with most of them.

One night, as I sat in an old barn outside Tulsa, I realized that Jesus was calling me to follow Him, just as He had called his disciples 2000 years ago. In tears, and I think, without totally realizing the cost of the Call, I said yes.

I spent about the next 18 years of my life in many ways running from that call in my life, and trying to avoid its implications. Jesus doesn't simply call us as believers to go to church, or even simply to hand out tracts and help people. He calls us to a different life, one that is focused on His purposes and His value system. During that 18 year period, I spent a lot of time looking Christian, and even thinking I was following Christ. I worked representing death row inmates for a significant period of time in Oklahoma. I went to church, taught, led Bible studies, and played music in choirs and praise bands. But I was still hanging on to my definition of how my life was supposed to play out.

One of the biggest impacts on my life during that time period was when my friend Mike died. Mike was one of my clients on death row, and at the time of his execution, I had known him for over

two years as his attorney, and as his brother in Christ. Mike had found Jesus in prison and served as a living example of the truth that Jesus died for all sins, and can forgive and restore anyone who will turn to him. The last thing Mike did before he died was to tell the people in the room watching him die about Jesus. And I thought, how much focus and faith do you have to have to do that?

I think it was at that point that God really began to speak to me about the level of my faith. Did I truly believe what I claimed to believe? Was I willing to identify myself as a follower of Jesus, not just a member of a church? In the course of this extended discussion, God used circumstances in my life to bring me back home to Arkansas. And it was through those circumstances that God brought my friend Chuck into my life also. Chuck walked into our home church group one night and said he had been reading Revelation and had been struck by Revelation 12:10-11, which reads:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.

He said he had been particularly struck by the power of the "word of their testimony." In discussion we realized how little we as Christians actually tell our stories about what God has done in each of our lives.

Many people say that believing in Christ is a crutch, and that we should be able to stand without Him. I saw that we all are flawed human beings, who Christ loved despite our pride and disobedience. And He is not a crutch. He is life support. Many also say that following Him is too hard and costs too much. All I can say is that if you want your life to actually count for something - to mean something past its end in this world - becoming a follower of Jesus is the only way for that to happen. And although my life has been incredibly far from perfect, because I am incredibly far from perfect, I can say in truth that I know where my Hope is. And whatever the circumstance, Jesus has kept in me a hunger and a desire to follow Him. I pray the same for each person who reads this.

You can find more stories from people who have had their lives changed by Jesus at :
www.cross-purposes.org.