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What Is This?

You have before you now the Covenant Membership Expansion Packet. This Expansion Packet is for those interested in diving deeper into any or all of the topics raised in the Covenant Membership Handbook. The contents here, while important, remain supplemental to the Handbook and in no way represent required reading. Refer to it as little or as much as you'd like.

How Do I Use It?

Remember that the Handbook and this Expansion Packet have been designed to work together. As you progress through the Handbook, you will be alerted to the existence of expansion material in a manner similar to the example below:

✦ *For more on church membership and the way it will play out here at Mercy Hill, see **Expansion 1: The Five Aspects of Church Membership**.*

If you think the expansion material will be helpful, interesting, edifying for you, check it out!

Where Do I Store It?

While you can store the hardcopy of this Expansion Packet in a separate binder if you prefer, it can also conveniently be inserted at the end of the binder containing the Handbook. This allows for quick and easy reference if so desired.

Expansion 1

The Five Aspects of Church Membership

To help us better understand what church membership is and how it will play out here at Mercy Hill, let's consider now what we've called the five aspects of church membership.



1. Church Membership Is *Affirmation* from the Elders

We're going to start with the *process* here and then we'll move back towards the *theology* that stands behind it.

The Process

If an individual feels called to join himself to this church as a Covenant Member, then he would go through the formal process we're developing here, which would land him eventually across the table from an Elder or two for what we are calling the Covenant Membership Conversation.

The purpose of this conversation is threefold:

- It gives you a chance to get to know us and confirm that this is the right local church for you.
- It gives us a chance to get to know you and confirm that you understand that gospel, and that Jesus seems to be your Savior and Lord.
- It begins the beautiful process of being knit together in love as we share stories, hear your heart, and help you along your way to becoming a Covenant Member at Mercy Hill Church.

We say Church Membership is affirmation from the "Elders" in particular here because that's really where the process of affirmation begins. And rightly so. Elders are commissioned by the Holy Spirit through the church to

oversee and care for all of its members. They are to lead the way in shepherding the flock, which would mean leading the way in adding to the flock: “Is this a sheep or is this a goat or, worse, is this a wolf?” (cf. Act 20:28-31a).

But the process of affirmation doesn’t stop with the Elders, it culminates finally with the whole church. Assuming things progress for the prospective Covenant Member, notice of the Elders’ recommendation will be given to the current membership of the church, and they will have an opportunity to bring any concerns they have to the Elders for consideration.

Now, pause. It is likely at this point that, for some of you, your heart is racing, your palms are sweating, your blood pressure is rising. So let’s be clear. . .

We are not talking here about that stuff that goes down on those cop shows you watch on TV before bed. We’re not doing some sort of criminal investigation on you—we’ve got the warrant, we’re breaking down your door, and we’re going through all your stuff with our magnifying glasses and clipboards.

No! We just want to do our best to confirm that you’re a Christian. That’s it.

Again, let’s be clear. . .

- We *are not* talking about—“Does this person understand the full index of biblical theology?” We are all growing in our knowledge of Scripture.
- We *are* talking about—“Does this person understand the gospel—that they are a sinner; that they need a Savior; that Jesus died and rose for them?”

- We *are not* talking about—“Does this individual have any sin in their lives?” We all have sin.
- We *are* talking about—“Does this individual have *clear, consistent, calloused* unrepentant sin in their life that brings their profession of faith into question?”

- We *are not* talking about—“Has this person attained perfection?” Is anyone perfect here? This church wouldn’t exist if that were the qualification for membership.
- We *are* talking about—“By grace, is this person heading in the right direction?”

We are simply wanting to confirm that this person has a credible profession of faith; that they seem to be Christians—banged-up, sin-struggling, grace-embracing, slowly-growing Christians, just like the rest of us.

Jonathan Leeman writes wonderfully on this subject:

If I . . . were to write a standards guide for those conducting membership interviews, I would go straight to Matthew’s beatitudes. It might read something like this: “Look for the ones who are poor in spirit; who mourn for their sin; who aren’t entitled, always insisting on their own way, but who are meek; who are sick to death of sin and all its nonsense and so hunger and thirst for righteousness like it’s water. When you find people like that, make sure they know who Jesus is. Make sure Jesus is the One who fills their impoverished spirit, who has forgiven their sins, who receives their life and worship, and whose righteousness they depend upon and pursue. When you find such people, tell them to join!”

Notice that it’s not a person’s moral perfection that qualifies him or her for church membership. It’s just the opposite. It’s his or her recognition of a lack of moral perfection coupled with a hunger for it. It’s not the people who never sin; it’s the people who fight against sin. A church’s judicial work is to affirm not the righteous but the unrighteous who thirst for righteousness—the righteousness only God in Christ can give.

Here's one more way to say it: what makes people acceptable to a church is not their own moral purity, but Christ's—not what they have done to save themselves, but what God has done to save them.¹

Church membership is not a pride thing—“I'm in and you're out.” No! It's actually just the opposite. The only way you get in is by finally acknowledging that you're out—“I'm out of strength; I'm out of righteousness; I'm out of riches; I'm out of options; but I have Christ. Can I come in?” “Yes!”

We are simply wanting to confirm that this person has a credible profession of faith; that they seem to be Christians—banged-up, sin-struggling, grace-embracing, slowly-growing Christians, just like the rest of us.

The Theology

Now, let's get to the theology behind this process.

What we have in mind here is what's been referred to as the church's power of the keys. These keys are first mentioned by Jesus with reference to Peter upon his profession of faith in Jesus as the Christ: “I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you (sg.) bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you (sg.) loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16:18–19).

Christ is giving Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven”. Keys open doors and let people in. But they also lock doors and put people out. With these keys, Christ is giving Peter the authority to bind or loose, to affirm or reject an individual's participation in His kingdom and church. Some who try to attach themselves to the church will be bound—affirmed as true believers; others will be loosed—rejected as false professors (we might think of Ananias and Saphira on this point [Acts 5:1-11]).

But then, amazingly, just two chapters later in Matthew's gospel, we see plainly that these keys are not just given by Christ to Peter, they are, in fact, given to the entire church. Speaking of an unrepentant sinner, Jesus instructs His disciples:

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you (pl.) bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you (pl.) loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven . . . For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. (Matt 18:17–18, 20)

The same key-wielding activity of binding and loosing is referred to—only now the “you” doing it is plural in the Greek. Jesus is talking about the church. He's talking about us.

Have no doubt: these are Christ's keys; it's His authority. But He uses those keys, He exercises His authority, through His church! The church is to take part in affirming true believers and rejecting false professors.

We tremble at the thought! This is an awesome task. Please do not ever think that your leaders here are looking to monopolize these keys and use them as some sort of power play to manipulate you for selfish gain. There's much in us that doesn't even want the keys. We just want to put them back in Jesus' hand and say, “You do it!

¹ *Church Membership* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 88-89.

We're not worthy of such a thing. We're going to screw it up!" But He wants us to shepherd. He wants us to care for the flock. As Elders, it seems He wants us to lead the way in this. But, as His church, He wants all of us involved.

2. Church Membership Is *Assurance* to the Individual

Now you might think what we just outlined sounds like a horrifying process.

Maybe you're an introvert, already prone to fear what others are thinking. Maybe you've imbibed the full spirit of American individualism—"Get out of my business! Who do you think you are?" Or maybe you've suffered painful abuse at the hands of church authority in the past—"You're just waiting to hurt me, to condemn me, to manipulate me, to embarrass me!" Whatever the case may be, please hear: this process is not designed to be *horrifying*; it's actually designed to be *healing*.

We might feel safe doing our Christianity thing on the fringes, but it is actually quite a dangerous place to be. The lone Christian is terribly prone to the errors of either *self-deception* or *self-doubt*.

Self-Deception

On the one hand, you might be thinking you are just fine—"Me and Jesus are tight." But maybe you're not. Maybe you don't really get the cross. Maybe you're still living in sin. Maybe you're self-deceived. Maybe you're headed towards that haunting verdict described in Matthew 7:22-23: "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

If the devil can keep you thinking you're fine, doesn't the devil win?

An Elder Council, a church, that wants to help you avoid this kind of self-deception, is not a horrifying thing. It's a healing thing. When you do truly come to know Christ, when they do affirm your relationship with Him, it is for your blessed assurance: "As far as this church and its leaders can tell, that Day will go well for me! I will not hear 'Depart from Me I never knew you', but 'Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master.'"

Self-Doubt

On the other hand, you might be terribly prone to doubt your salvation. You might have such a sensitive conscience, and feel so painfully condemned, that you are all but certain that the Elders and the church will turn you away once they really get to know you.

If the devil, the accuser of the brethren, can keep you doubting your salvation, does he not rob you of all the joy that is yours in Christ?

So what then when you finally gain the courage to let the Elders and the church in and they declare: "As far as we can tell, you are the real thing. Rest assured dear sister, dear brother. You are a member of Christ's body and a member of this church."

Again, an Elder Council, a church, that wants to help you avoid this kind of self-doubt, is not a horrifying thing. It's a healing thing.

3. Church Membership Is *Accountability* with the Church

As members of this local expression of Christ's universal church, we are to be more than just hospitable or charitable to one another (though even this is an astounding miracle)—we are also to be *accountable*.

This means that we are honest with one another—about our lives, about our hearts, about who we really are and what we're really dealing with. It means that, not only is the front door to my home open to you, but that closet door in the furthest, darkest, back room—where I keep all of my skeletons and cobwebs—is open to you as well.

Now, please don't misunderstand. We're not saying we don't use wisdom in who we share with and how. We're not saying all of your junk has to be posted to your Facebook wall or something's gone wrong with you. We are saying, that the strangest thing happens when Christ gets a hold of us: suddenly we want to let you in—we want to confess sin, and get accountability, and open our lives up to others.

To be a Christian is to come out of hiding—to come out of darkness and into the light. Jesus says in John 3:19-20: "The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed."

But the Christian is one who says, "I'm done hiding. I need help. And Jesus is the One who can help me." We step into the light of the cross and find from God not condemnation but salvation. And in the glory of that light, when at last we look to our left and our right, what is it that we see? The church. Brothers and sisters given by God to us as gifts, to keep us living, walking in that light.

Do you remember that horrifying response Cain gave to God after he had murdered his brother Abel and God came to him inquiring of Abel's whereabouts? "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9b). The answer to Cain's question, according to the Bible, with reference to brothers and sisters in the church is: "Yes!"

This is why the author of Hebrews would exhort the church in this way: "[L]et us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb 10:24–25).

There are roaches still crawling in our flesh. There's a countermovement in us that still longs for the damp darkness of sin. Church membership says: "I want that Day to go well for me and for you. Therefore I want you in my life, and I want to get into yours. I want to be accountable to the church."

4. Church Membership Is *Announcement* before the World

Let us ask a few questions at this point. Who in this church is representing Christ to the nations? Who among us is a part of that blessed assembly that has unique access to the presence of God, as His people, commissioned for His purpose? Anyone that walks through the doors of our sanctuary? Certainly you wouldn't say so. We have an open door policy here. We want unbelievers, apostates, backsliders, rebels in our midst. But we wouldn't want the world looking to them to try to discover what Christ is like. So who would we point them to?

Church membership helps us draw a clearer line around those whom we as a church know are walking with Christ, and those whom, either we know aren't, or whom we don't know enough about to say either way. To admit a person into membership is to announce before the world: "If you're wondering what Jesus is all about, look to this brother or sister and you'll soon see!"

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5. Church Membership Is *Ardor* for God’s Name

To become a Christian is to take the name of God upon us. We are baptized “in [Gk. ‘eis’—lit. ‘into’] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). This reality is powerfully pictured for us in what is described of the saints in Revelation 22: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (v. 4).

So what happens in a country where, according to the Pew Forum, 70% label themselves as Christians? “I’m a Christian. I’m a pretty good person. I go to church on Christmas and Easter. I wear a cross necklace. I don’t smoke. I’m certainly not a Buddhist. So I suppose I’m a Christian.” You want to know what happens? Christ’s name is defiled. Because so many take His name upon themselves without even knowing Him in the first place. People look in and think: “This guy’s supposedly a Christian? I want none of that!”

Church membership comes in and says: “Wait a minute. Let’s clean up the stats a bit. Not everyone who professes Christ knows Him.” It seeks to draw crisper lines between those who seem to be true believers and those who seem only to be false professors, so as to preserve the name of our God. When the church admits someone into membership, we are saying: “Yes, we see that Christ’s name is upon you.” And, consequently, we promote the assurance of the individual, we protect the purity of the church, we proclaim a clearer message to the world, and we preserve the name and glory of God!

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1. Because It’s Strong

Perhaps you are wondering: why “Covenant” Membership? Honestly, we went back and forth on this. But, interestingly, the very reason we initially went back on it is now the reason we are so passionately going forward with it. And that is, namely: it’s a strong word. “Covenant”. It sounds really serious, almost scary. At first, we hesitated on the word because it makes one think of marriage. It sounds like you’re joining this church until death do you part, like a cult you can’t break free from.

But, over time, we’ve begun to see just how critical this language is. We are going to get into conflict with each other. We are going to hurt each other. The church isn’t always going to meet our needs. Sometimes the music is going to be off key. Sometimes the preaching is going to be too long. Sometimes the people we thought would love us wisely will instead wound us deeply.

So what do we do? Leave? No. We press in. There is a depth of relationship and glory that can only be seen on the other side of covenant. This doesn’t mean we’re married. But it does mean that we’re really serious about this. This doesn’t mean your joining a cult and can never get out. But it does mean that you are joining a community and are committed to playing a vital role in it.

My (Nick) father-in-law was in town a while back and he was bemoaning the fact that the tomato plants in Megan’s and my garden are producing so much more fruit than those in his garden. My wife, being a horticulture major, pointed out that he was probably watering too much, that tomato plants produce more fruit the more they are tested. And I thought, “That’s just like the church! If we’re always going after the water, the comfort, if every time things get tough we up and left, we wouldn’t bear any fruit!”

Covenant Memberships says: “I’m setting my roots down deep in this local community. I know it might get hard. But God’s going to use this. And we’re going to see fruit here. I’m not just looking to come and go, I want to commit and grow!”

*I’m not just looking to come and go,
I want to commit and grow!*

2. Because It’s Biblical

But there’s another reason we chose this word “Covenant”. Not only is it strong, it’s biblical. We often don’t realize it, but when God brings people into covenant with Himself, He always brings them into covenant with one another as well.

The easiest place to see this is with Jesus at the Lord’s Supper. Jesus is sitting down around the table with His guys to celebrate the Passover one last time. The shadow of the cross is heavy upon Him. Death has Him by the ankles. He already knows He’s going to be betrayed by Judas and abandoned by the others—every last one of them will soon scatter to save his own neck.

And yet Jesus doesn't pull away from them. No! He takes up the bread and the cup, and He presses in, He covenants with them: "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20b). He makes the bread and cup symbols of His body and blood and says: "This is how much I love you...to death. I'm with you in this...to the end. Do you think your sins can keep you from Me? Think again!"

But now here's the amazing thing: this covenant Christ makes with us, sets up our covenant with one another. Because it's around a table that this takes place. And there are others seated around this table. It's not just Him doing this with each person individually. Suddenly the disciples look around and they realize: "We are in this thing with Him *together*."

Paul would later spell out this reality for the local church in Corinth: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:16-17).

Do you see what he just did? He took the elements that Christ used as signs of His covenant with us and he made them signs of our covenant with one another! The bread which signifies His body broken for us (going from one to many), at the same time signifies His church uniting in Him (going from many to one). He gave His life on the cross so that He might not only call us into covenant with Himself, but into covenant with one another!

The bread which signifies His body broken for us (going from one to many), at the same time signifies His church uniting in Him (going from many to one). He gave His life on the cross so that He might not only call us into covenant with Himself, but into covenant with one another!

We meet around this table—like a family dinner—and we feast on the elements that symbolize Christ's death on a cross for us. May it never be, that around this table we would partake of the very symbols of Christ's self-sacrificing commitment to us, and then turn and close our hearts against one another! "But you don't know what they did to me—I could never forgive that." "But they are just so different from me—I feel too awkward." "But they're just so uncool—they're hurting my rep with the guys at work." Really? Do we honestly think that Jesus couldn't say all of this and a million times more to us? But He didn't pull away, He pressed in—He covenanted.

So as we come to the table on Sundays to partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine, by all means, look up at your Savior. Stand in awe of the cross whereby He receives and covenants with sinners like us. But don't forget to stop and look around at the brothers and sisters gathered around the table with you—at your family in Christ. When Christ brings us into covenant with Himself, He brings us into covenant with one another!

That's why we're calling this "Covenant" Membership.

“[F]or us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist”

1 Corinthians 8:6

From Him, for Him, and through Him

As we attempt to quickly introduce our value of Faith, let’s begin by recalling that short description we gave in Section II: “Faith: Knowing and Loving the Lord—We are the Bride of Christ, created and redeemed to enjoy intimate relationship with Him. This value presses our church upwards in love for Him.”

We chose 1 Corinthians 8:6, as the key verse for this value. Commenting on this verse, Leon Morris writes: “We came from him and we live for him; he is our origin and goal” (TNTC 7, p. 125).

Human beings were created and designed to participate in transcendent reality—a reality that extends far above us, a reality that invigorates and infuses the material, tangible world in which we live. We are not supposed to look up at the stars, see the endless expanse, and merely confine our reflections to the realms of our science or art. We are to move in our reflections beyond the stars to the God who created them and us—“The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psa 19:1). It’s as if God is crying out for relationship with us from all corners of His creation. That’s why Paul would say: “He is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In Him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27–28). He is all around us. He is our atmosphere. He is our reason for being.

This is what makes the secular humanistic worldview of our culture so thoroughly dissatisfying—“Life is all about man; we don’t need God!” They suck the soul right out of the universe. And everything just falls to the floor like a corpse. There’s no transcendent anymore. There’s no meaning anymore. There’s no God.

We mistakenly think getting rid of God will be our freedom, but it truly becomes our slavery. We mistakenly think getting rid of God will make us more like gods—we get to call the shots, rule our lives, do what we want—but it truly makes us more like the animals—we are ruled by our instincts, in bondage to our lusts, destructive in our habits.

The second part of 1 Corinthians 8:6 points us in the direction of God’s great redemption and rescue. He has not left Himself without a witness in creation. And He has not left us without a Savior in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the One through whom He created all things, is also now the One redeeming all things. He is the One “through whom we exist”. He is the One who “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet 3:18). He puts the soul back in the universe, He gives the stars back their singing voice, He brings man back to God! And now we can again know and love Him, just as we were created to do!

This is what we mean when we say we value Faith in this church. We are pressing upwards into this relationship.

Our value of Faith at Mercy Hill informs our Passions. Below are two Passions that flow out from this value.

1. The Divine Word

How do we come to truly know and love the Lord? How can we be sure we even have a right understanding of who He is and what He has done? How can we know our faith isn't actually blind?

Answer: God Himself has spoken to us—"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1-2).

From the beginning, our God speaks. He knows and loves us and wants to be known and loved by us. He doesn't leave us to our vain imaginations. He speaks through the fog and reveals Himself truly to us. That's why we speak of this value as Faith: "[F]aith comes from hearing, and hearing through the *word* of Christ" (Rom 10:17). We come to know and love God by trusting what He has spoken and revealed to us of Himself.

This leads us to what we would identify as a Passion of Mercy Hill Church: namely, we are passionate about The Divine Word. In other words, we are passionate about the Bible, for the Bible is God's word to us: "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim 3:16). In the Scriptures, it's as if God pulls up a chair next to us, and begins to speak.

As a church, there are two ways we can relate to this Divine Word that we should quickly reflect on here: (1) We Sit Under It; and (2) We Stand Upon It.

1. We Sit Under It

The Word of God, as it has been recorded for us in Scripture, is to be set over us, and we are to situate ourselves under it. We do not place ourselves above Him, but take our place under Him, at His feet. May it always be that God gets the first word in this church!

In fact, it's 2 Timothy 3:16 that fuels the charge Paul gives to Timothy in 4:1-2—"Preach the word." "Set this word over your people Timothy...and preach it!"

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, has spoken about the symbol of the pulpit in our churches. So many in this postmodern era have been ready to do away with the pulpit and the preaching that animates it. Isn't preaching an outdated way of communicating? Isn't such a method detestable to the postmodern man?

Have you ever heard someone say, or perhaps you've even said yourself: "Don't preach at me!" What is meant by this? Is it not that we are saying: "Don't talk down to me, as if you know and I don't. How could you be so arrogant?!" Preaching in our day has come to be synonymous with pride and pushiness.

If we want to effectively reach people in the current cultural climate, should we not break down our pulpits and use their wood to build tables, around which we can sit and simply, harmlessly, humbly dialogue with others? Certainly there is a place in the church for the table. But the table must not replace the pulpit, or the church will go with it!

My (Nick) preaching must not be interpreted as: "Nick thinks he is better than everyone else in this room." Certainly men have used the pulpit for this kind of vainglory, and this perhaps is why so many now have a great

disdain for it. But the pulpit and preaching serve a much more sublime reality. They remind us not that Nick is above us, but that God is above us—that God gets the first word; that we have been created because God spoke over the formless void and life came forth; that we have been redeemed because God spoke over our dead bones and life came forth once more.

That is why we are passionate about the pulpit in this church! Not so that the preachers can push their agenda on everyone, but so that God can bring the dead to life and, once alive, can continue guiding, nourishing, cherishing, and preserving His bride!

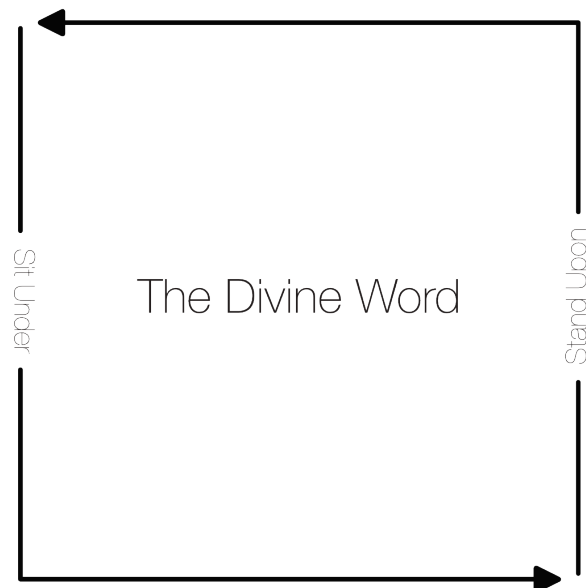
May it always be that God gets the first word in this church!

2. We Stand Upon It

And this leads to the second way we relate as a church to this Divine Word: We Stand Upon It. We are a church that sets over us the Word of God. Preaching is just one way we do this. It's symbolic of the whole of our lives, lived under the authority of His Word.

But, although God's word is over us, it doesn't oppress us. God is not a tyrant. He's a Servant. So as we set His Word over us, we find that it actually starts to lay a stable foundation underneath us. That which we sit under, we find that we stand upon! God speaks, even hard words, not to tear us down, but to build us up.

Hear now the full context of 2 Timothy 3:16 into verse 17: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." God is profiting you, completing you, equipping you as He speaks! The Divine Word which we sit under is also that which we stand upon!



2. Mysterious Orthodoxy

There's a second Passion we want to highlight at this point. We are passionate about what we call "Mysterious Orthodoxy". Here's what we mean by this. Is God one or is He three? Is Jesus God or is He man? Is God sovereign or is man responsible? The answer to all of these questions is simply: "Yes." But when we are asked how this is so, the answer is simply: "I don't know. God says it. I believe it."

Now, perhaps, you see how the first passion flows into the second. We take God at His word, even when it leads us headlong into mystery.

So much of what is now considered biblical orthodoxy has been forged along the lines of mystery. The church has learned over the years to articulate clearly even what she doesn't understand fully (the doctrine of the trinity and the doctrine of Christ being perfect examples).

On the other hand, so much of what is now understood to be heresy, veered off into such error precisely because men felt they must strip God of the mystery. "It must fit into our minds or it cannot be so." Jesus could not have been both fully God and fully man. Therefore, maybe He wasn't fully God (the heresy of Arianism). Or maybe He wasn't fully man (the heresy of Docetism). Mysterious Orthodoxy says: "I don't know how, but He's both."

We are helped here by what J.I. Packer says concerning biblical truth and what he calls "antinomies":

[An antinomy] is an apparent incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence, but it is a mystery to know how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together. Let me give you an example. Modern physics faces an antinomy, in this sense, in its study of light. There is cogent evidence to show that light consists of waves, and equally cogent evidence to show that it consists of particles. It is not apparent how light can be both waves and particles, but the evidence is there, and so neither view can be ruled out in favor of the other. Neither, however, can be reduced to the other or explained in terms of the other; the two seemingly incompatible positions must be held together, and both must be treated as true. Such a necessity scandalizes our tidy minds, no doubt, but there is no help for it if we are to be loyal to the facts.¹

Speaking particularly of the antinomy that entails between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, Packer goes on to write:

What the Bible does is to assert both truths side by side in the strongest and most unambiguous terms as two ultimate facts; this, therefore is the position we must take in our own thinking. C. H. Spurgeon was one asked if he could reconcile these two truths to each other. "I wouldn't try," he replied; "I never reconcile friends." Friends?—Yes, *friends*. This is the point that we have to grasp. In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies. They are not uneasy neighbors; they are not in an endless state of cold war with each other. They are *friends*, and they work together.²

Again, we must learn to articulate clearly what we can't understand fully. And such a thing is actually quite reasonable. To say that God will, in some sense, always be unreasonable to us, is, in fact, one of the most reasonable things we can say. For how unreasonable is it to think that the infinite, eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, holy One could be fully contained within the miniscule compass of a creature's mind? He is the Creator, we are the creature. Can an ant comprehend the full extent of human complexity? Certainly we would not say so. And yet the distance between man and God is infinitely greater than that between the ant and man. How much more so should we be willing to admit, then, that some mystery will, even must, subsist at the very core of our faith. And so it does!

¹ *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 24.

² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

If a man is to become a Christian, he must finally reach a place where he is willing to say: “Jesus, I want you not just as my Savior, but as my Lord.” By this we mean that he must fully surrender to Christ’s authority: “What You say goes.” Until then, it is quite certain that a person cannot even be saved. You either have Him as Savior and Lord, or you do not have Him at all.

And when Jesus is Lord, if we come to things in His Word that we don’t understand, we don’t raise our objections and our fists. We might struggle. We might question. This is okay. But at last, we have learned the secret of Psalm 131: “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me” (v. 1). We let Him be God. We receive His interpretation of reality, even if we can’t figure out how it all fits together.

Somewhere along the way we started thinking the we must have all our questions answered before we can believe. But this is really quite foolish when once we step back and consider it. How can we, a finite, time-bound creature possibly wrap our little minds around the infinite, eternal Creator? It is unthinkable (pun intended). Far better would it be for us if we would stop trying to steal the seat of honor around the table and just put ourselves in the seat of a child (they have more of the fun anyways). God is on the throne. Ours is to trust Him and relax.

Now we are not saying that we are not to think deeply about the revelation He has given us in the Scriptures. The Elders/Pastors of this church are giving their lives over to such deep thinking! But we do mean to say that, when at last we have studied and prayed and inquired, and still we don’t know how God can be both one and three, or how Jesus can be both God and man, or how God is absolutely sovereign and yet man is still responsible—we don’t throw it all out, but accept it on faith. Not blind faith, but a faith that sees clearly: He is God, and we are not. We embrace the mystery, because He is Savior, because He is Lord, and we trust Him.

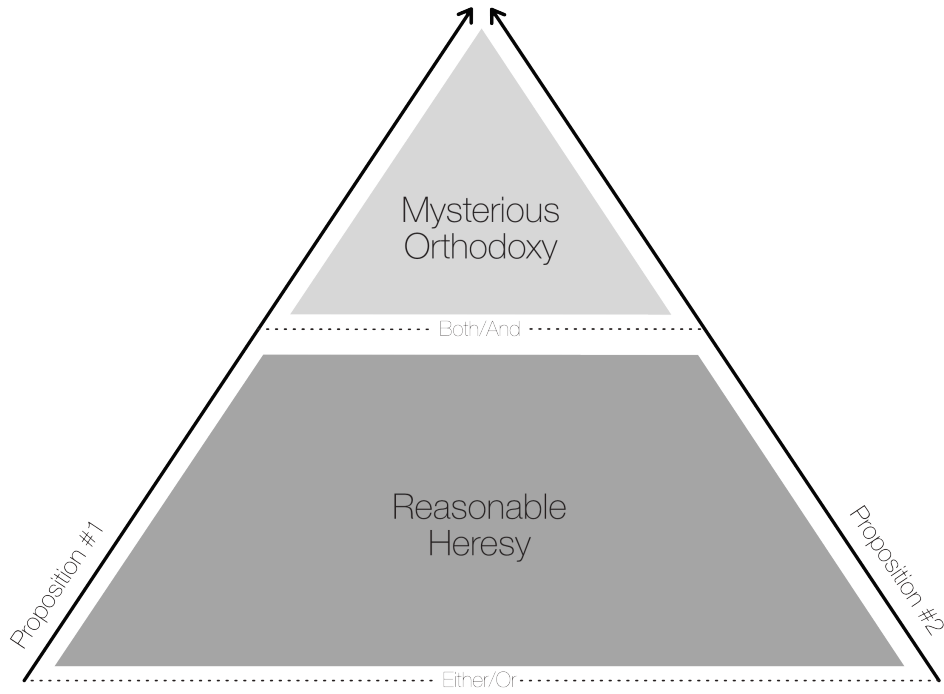
To say that God will, in some sense, always be unreasonable to us, is, in fact, one of the most reasonable things we can say. For how unreasonable is it to think that the infinite, eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, holy One could be fully contained within the miniscule compass of a creature’s mind? He is the Creator, we are the creature.

This mystery will ultimately lead us to one of two places: grumbling or glorying. It either fuels our resentment of God or our worship of Him.

We want to come out where Paul comes out in Romans 11 after dealing with the deep mysteries of God’s sovereign grace and election: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to Him that he might be repaid?’ For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen” (vv. 33–36).

As a church, when we come to things we can’t piece together in His word, this is where we must go! Not to grumbling and resentment, but to glorying and worship!

Romans
11:33-36



P1 = God is one.
P2 = God is three.

P1 = Jesus is fully God.
P2 = Jesus is fully man.

P1 = God is sovereign.
P2 = Man is responsible.

Background

The "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" was produced at an international Summit Conference of evangelical leaders, held at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare in Chicago in the fall of 1978. This congress was sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. The Chicago Statement was signed by nearly 300 noted evangelical scholars, including James Boice, Norman L. Geisler, John Gerstner, Carl F. H. Henry, Kenneth Kantzer, Harold Lindsell, John Warwick Montgomery, Roger Nicole, J. I. Packer, Robert Preus, Earl Radmacher, Francis Schaeffer, R. C. Sproul, and John Wenham.

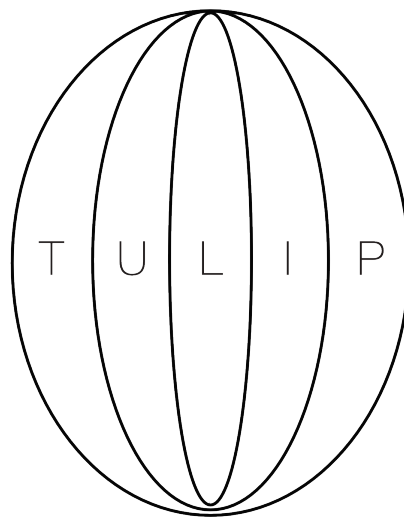
A Short Statement

1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.
2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.
3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.
4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.
5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.

For More...

This is only the first section of the larger statement. You can find the Articles of Affirmation and Denial, and an accompanying Exposition online.

The Reformed view of salvation is best crystallized in what has come to be known as the five points of Calvinism, memorably contained within the acronym T-U-L-I-P.



Total Depravity | Unconditional Election | Limited Atonement | Irresistible Grace | Perseverance of the Saints

Let's look at these five points briefly one by one.

1. Total Depravity

By Total Depravity we mean, essentially, that man is dead in his sin, wholly opposed to God by nature: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14).

Did you catch that? We are so corrupt in our sin, that we need the Spirit before we could ever receive the things of the Spirit. This is why Jesus would say to Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [by the Spirit (v. 5)] he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

Or consider Paul's devastating estimation of humanity in Ephesians 2:1-5:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.

The Scriptures depict men not as drowning in the sea of their sin, but dead at the bottom it. Salvation, therefore, is not God in Christ casting out a lifesaver for drowning people to grab a hold of if they so will. No! Salvation is

God in Christ diving down to the ocean floor, grabbing a hold of us—ice-cold sinners, dragging us up to the surface, and bringing us back to life!

We are not merely drowning, we are drowned. We are born dead. And in Him, we are born again!

2. Unconditional Election

By Unconditional Election we mean that God chose you not on the basis of any condition you met, but with regard to His mercy alone: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy” (Rom 9:15).

With Total Depravity as our presupposition, it is clear, we cannot choose God. Therefore, if we are to be saved, God must choose us. Which is why Jesus would turn to His disciples and say “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). And it’s why Luke would record that when Paul and Barnabas were preaching in Antioch: “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48).

And He chooses us, appoints us, elects us unconditionally: “[God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim 1:9).

3. Limited Atonement

Now this one gets a little controversial, even among the Reformed. Admittedly, the word choice is a little confusing. But really, it’s just a question of the perspective from which you view the atonement.

In one sense, Christ’s atonement, His death on the cross, is not limited but universal. It is sufficient to pay for the debt of all mankind. Jesus is “the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). It is not as if He needed 6 quarts of blood to purchase all of humanity but he only had 5—“Whoops, I guess I’ll settle for limited atonement.”

No! That’s not it. His blood is sufficient for any who would come. But, shifting perspectives, while it is *universal* in one sense, it is *limited*, or *definite*, or *particular*, in another sense. He paid for a specific people—those whom “God chose . . . in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4). He offered up His life as the bride price, as it were. He died not hoping that His bride would come, but so that His bride would come.

This is why some prefer to call this Definite Atonement. But T-U-D-I-P doesn’t have quite the same ring to it.

4. Irresistible Grace

By Irresistible Grace we mean that when God purposes to save a person, there is no stopping Him.

So many go to the story of Lazarus as an illustration of this. Lazarus is dead, but Jesus is the King. And from outside the tomb He ushers the royal summons: “Lazarus, come out” (John 11:43). And the dead man comes out. He can’t resist this grace.

That’s how we got saved! Read Ezekiel 37 if you need further evidence.

5. Perseverance of the Saints

By Perseverance of the Saints we mean that, if you’re in Christ, you’re going to make it to the end.

O sin-sick, storm-tossed Christian! You’re not even sure your faith will last through the day, let alone through to glory. Perseverance of the Saints says, “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

“He . . . began.” Because He began, He will bring it to completion. Do you really think God won’t finish what He’s started?! “[T]hose whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom 8:30).

Everybody wants this fifth point. Sometimes they try to get it without the others: “I don’t like all this election stuff, but I’ll take perseverance and assurance.” But this assurance of salvation only blossoms on the sturdy stem and deep roots of the preceding four points! Because you couldn’t do this thing and God has taken it upon Himself to do it, you can be assured He’s going to get you to glory!

Everybody wants this fifth point. Sometimes they try to get it without the others. But this assurance of salvation only blossoms on the sturdy stem and deep roots of the preceding four points!

And lest you think that this is some kind of New Testament idiosyncrasy, rest assured: it’s not! These five points are wonderfully illustrated for us in God’s dealings with Israel back in the Old Testament.

1. For they were in bondage in Egypt and couldn't break free. (Total Depravity)
2. They were elected of God not because they were the largest of nations (they were the smallest), but because God had mercy upon them. (Unconditional Election)
3. And He puts the blood of the Lamb over the doorposts of Israel, not over those of Egypt. And the Angel of Death passes over them. (Limited Atonement)
4. And then God summons His people. The divine voice, like the roar of a lion, shakes at the foundations of Egypt: “Let My people go!” (Exo 5:1). And out His people come. (Irresistible Grace)
5. And YHWH carries His people to the promised land so that Joshua could stand on the other side of the Jordan and say: “[N]ot one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass” (Josh 23:14)!

So, again, this is not some New Testament idiosyncrasy. This is how God has always saved His people. This is how God saved you.

This is why we are Reformed.

It is my belief, and now the purpose of this paper to argue, that the miraculous spiritual gifts have not *ceased* but have *continued* into our modern age for the threefold purpose of: (1) glorifying God, (2) building up His church in unity and love, and (3) adorning His gospel as we bring it to the world. When understood rightly, a Continuationist approach to the miraculous spiritual gifts helps one to avoid the more deistic, rationalistic errors on the one side, and the more postmodern, subjectivistic errors on the other.

2 Views Defined

To put it simply: I am interested in arguing for what can be termed *Continuationism*¹ over and against *Cessationism*. To help us move forward in this I will provide a succinct definition of each and then attempt to define the three key elements that make up these definitions. This may seem overly technical at first, but it will provide the basis for our discussion as we progress.

What Is Cessationism?

Cessationism is the belief that certain/all miraculous spiritual gifts ceased with the apostolic age and the consequent close of the canon of Scripture (around 100 A.D.).²

What is Continuationism?

Continuationism is the belief that all³ spiritual gifts continue beyond the apostolic age and consequent close of the canon of Scripture and into the modern age.

3 Elements Defined

¹ Though the term is somewhat general, I am speaking here of a more moderate continuationism and not necessarily every representative theology of the Pentecostals, Charismatics, or Third Wavers (see *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, eds. Wayne Grudem and Stanley Gundry.). At base, I only mean by this term that miraculous spiritual gifts are meant to continue onto the modern stage, with certain qualifications, as we shall see.

² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1031.

³ My view excludes apostleship (understanding it to be more of an office than a gift). After all, if apostleship continued we would still be in the "apostolic age." I realize that there is some biblical warrant for distinguishing between the office and the gift and claiming that the gift has continued in some broader and less authoritative sense into our present day, but I'm not sure there is enough to make a clear case. Surely I support the idea that God calls and gifts men to plant churches and work at the cutting edge of global gospel advance, but I currently feel it might be unhelpful and misleading to use the term "apostle" for such an individual, given its typical connotations among Christians.

One exegetical point toward this end: Why, in the very section of Scripture where Paul calls apostles as "first" (1 Cor 12:28) and then exhorts the church to "earnestly desire the higher gifts" (1 Cor 12:31), does he not then exhort them to earnestly desire to be apostles, but rather to prophecy (1 Cor 14:1, 39)--the "second" gift on his list? Conclusion: perhaps it is because the gift of apostleship, in this case, is tied to the office and should not be separated and sought by believers at large.

Regardless, so long as men aren't claiming to be modern day apostles in the Pauline or Petrine sense but rather in a church-planter sense, I am not overly concerned with the idea of its continuance.

Each of these definitions contain three key elements that must be defined if we are to understand the arguments and implications of the two views. These elements are: (1) “spiritual gifts,” (2) “miraculous”, and (3) “apostolic.”

What Are Spiritual Gifts?

In a general sense, to quote Wayne Grudem here, “A spiritual gift is any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.”⁴ He keeps his definition broad because the Scriptures seem to be broad in their dealing with these gifts. Each of the six or so different lists⁵ given to us in the New Testament records a different set of gifts, leaving us to conclude that no one list is meant to be exhaustive but only illustrative of the kinds of gifts one can be given by God. Furthermore, we find in these lists both gifts related to *natural* abilities (teaching, administration, etc.) and gifts related to more *supernatural* processes (prophecy, healing, etc.),⁶ and are thereby cautioned against over-spiritualizing our definition.

Beyond the broad definition given by Grudem, to bring the picture into a more narrowed focus, it may prove helpful to look at spiritual gifts from three distinct vantage points:⁷

1. The Giver

From the vantage point of God as the Giver we can see that Spiritual gifts are:

- Sourced in our trinitarian God;⁸
- Divided into various manifestations;⁹
- Distributed according to His good pleasure¹⁰ and grace;¹¹
- Empowered by His Spirit;¹²
- And, thus, tending to His glory alone.¹³

They are manifestations in and through us of His own personality and power.

2. The Gifted

From the vantage point of Christians as the gifted, we find that the spiritual gifts, divided by God into various manifestations and given to us, can be helpfully classified on the ground according to the tripartite office of our Lord:

1. *Prophetic* gifts (used loosely to include gifts with an emphasis on speaking and language—teaching, prophesy, word of knowledge, word of wisdom).
2. *Priestly* gifts (gifts with an emphasis on service and compassion—service, helps).
3. *Kingly* gifts (gifts with an emphasis on ruling and order—administrating, leading).

Another helpful way to classify spiritual gifts as we see them on the ground is according to two categories:

1. *Word* gifts.

⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1016.

⁵ Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 7:7; 12:8-10, 28; 14:26; Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 4:10-11

⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1016.

⁷ Much of what follows has been influenced by Poythress, “Modern Spiritual Gifts”; and Clowney, *The Church*, ch. 16.

⁸ 1 Cor 12:4-6; Eph 4:4-6

⁹ Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:4-7; Eph 4:7

¹⁰ 1 Cor 12:11b, 18

¹¹ Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 3:10; 15:10; Eph 4:7; 1 Pet 4:10

¹² 1 Cor 12:11a; 1 Pet 4:11

¹³ 1 Cor 14:25; 1 Pet 4:11

2. Deed gifts.¹⁴

This classification is given to us specifically in 1 Peter 4:10-11.

It might prove useful to lay this twofold classification over the tripartite distinction. For it would seem the prophetic gifts strongly accent words, the kingly gifts strongly accent deeds, and the priestly gifts involve more of a balance between both words and deeds.

3. The Served

The Scriptures make plain that all spiritual gifts are meant to be “stewarded” in service of others outside of the one gifted.¹⁵ Hence, spiritual gifts are not to be understood as ends in themselves, but rather means to an end. From the vantage point, then, of the one(s) served we see that we can helpfully divide up these gifts in another way. For each of the spiritual gifts naturally lend themselves to the service of three main objects:

1. *God* (gifts of hymns, faith, tongues, etc.).
2. The *church* (gifts of prophecy, teaching, etc.).
3. The *world* (gifts of evangelism, etc.).

Of course, each spiritual gift can be seen in service of all three of these objects at once, but one object is often more directly served than others.

What Is a Miracle?

In one sense, we can define miracle as “a direct activity of God in the world”.¹⁶ But, in this broader sense, everything becomes a miracle and the word loses much technical meaning. The distinction that is helpful to make here, in order to narrow our definition, is between those *natural* means which God most often uses to attain His ends and those *supernatural* means which go above and beyond the natural laws He Himself established. For our purposes, then, a miracle, as Grudem puts it (adapting his definition from John Frame), is “a less common activity of God in which He arouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to Himself.”¹⁷

Relating this definition to the spiritual gifts, we understand “miraculous spiritual gifts” to be those gifts which incorporate more supernatural means to accomplish their ends—i.e. gifts of prophecy, tongues, miracles, healing, etc. Dr. Poythress, in his booklet “What Are Spiritual Gifts?”, makes a helpful contrast between *inferential* gifts with *non-inferential* gifts.¹⁸ Though he’s specifically dealing with word gifts in the context, his distinction can be applied to the deed gifts as well.

Inferential gifts are those which use more natural processes of reasoning and logic (teaching, exhortation). They are, in this way, non-miraculous. On the other hand, non-inferential gifts are those which are more supernatural and spontaneous (prophecy, tongues). They are, in this way, miraculous. His point, as I understand it, is that, in the former, we can more effectively trace our way back to the source, while, in the latter, we cannot. Applying this distinction to the deed gifts, the gifts of help and administration would be more “inferential” while the gifts of miracle and healing would be more “non-inferential.” Both would be miraculous in the broader sense, but only the latter carries its weight in the narrower sense.

¹⁴ Keep this twofold classification in mind as it will come into play later when discuss the continuation and cessation of certain gifts in the modern age.

¹⁵ 1 Pet 4:10

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1027.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹⁸ Poythress, “What Are Spiritual Gifts?”, 20-21.

It is, therefore, these miraculous, non-inferential spiritual gifts (of both word and deed) that are thought by Cessationists to have ceased after the apostolic age, and thought by Continuationists to have continued beyond it.

What is an Apostle?

If we are to understand what is meant by “apostolic age” we must know what is meant by the word “apostle” (apostolos in the Greek). Though this word in the Scriptures can apply broadly to the idea of messengers and sent ones,¹⁹ we are concerned here with its narrow sense: the special office of Apostle.²⁰ Let’s look quickly at three aspects of this special office:

1. Qualifications

For someone to be an Apostle of Jesus Christ, we are given unique qualifications from Scripture:

- *Called*—he must be called and commissioned for the task specifically by Jesus Christ;²¹
- *Shown*—he must be an eyewitness of the risen Lord;²²
- *Empowered*—he must be endued with spiritual power from on high;²³
- *Sent*—as the very name “Apostle” indicates, he must be sent out by Jesus specifically to give authoritative witness to the gospel;²⁴
- *And confirmed*—the Apostle of God will be confirmed by signs (miracles)²⁵ and seals (conversions).²⁶

2. Purpose

It has already been mentioned that the purpose of this office was to bear witness to the gospel in all the world (see “Sent” above), but mention must be made as to the unique authority God gave to this office. In short, they were given authority to write and speak God’s very own words.²⁷ The technical term used by theologians here is “inspiration,”²⁸ and by this is meant that God has breathed out His own words through them.²⁹

3. Cessation

Though some disagree, it seems clear, given the above qualifications, that the office (and gift) of apostleship has ceased. Here is the point on which moderate Continuationists and Cessationists can agree. In this sense, all ought to call themselves “Cessationists.” If more must be said to prove this point, let us briefly consider:

- The nature of the apostolic office was foundational, and a foundation is laid only once;³⁰
- Paul claims to be the last to have seen the risen Christ and, as such, considers himself the least of all the Apostles;³¹

¹⁹ John 13:16; 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25

²⁰ 1 Cor 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1; etc.

²¹ Mark 3:14; Matt 10:1-7; Acts 1:2; 9:15; 10:41-42; 1 Cor 12:28

²² Luke 1:2; 24:48; John 15:27; Acts 1:3, 22; 4:33; 10:41-42; 1Co 9:1; 15:7-9; 1 John 1:1-5

²³ Acts 1:4-5; Luke 12:12; John 14:26

²⁴ Acts 1:8; Matt 28:19-20; John 20:21

²⁵ 2 Cor 12:11-12

²⁶ 1 Cor 9:1-2; Heb 2:4

²⁷ Matt 10:40; John 14:25-6; 16:12-15; 1 Cor 14:37; Eph 2:20; 3:1-6; Titus 1:1-3; Heb 2:2-3; 2 Pet 3:2; Rev 1:1-2

²⁸ Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, 133.

²⁹ 2 Tim 3:16

³⁰ Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14; cf. Matt 16:18; Jude 3

³¹ 1 Cor 15:8-9

- At the end of their earthly ministries, the Apostles begin strongly pointing people back to their written words (not forward to new Apostles or prophets).³²

When the apostolic office ceased, the apostolic purpose (to speak and write the words of God) ceased, and, hence, the canon of Scripture closed. It is, therefore, after the last of these Apostles died (the end of the apostolic age) and the consequent close of the canon that Cessationists and Continuationists disagree about the status of the miraculous word and deed spiritual gifts.

Agree to Disagree?

On the definitions and descriptions provided here of these three elements—spiritual gifts, miracles, Apostles—most all Cessationists and Continuationists would agree. But it is what each does with these elements that creates the division in belief.

- Cessationists link the miraculous word and deed gifts to the apostolic office and hence, argue that these gifts ceased with the office.
- Continuationists, on the other hand, holding likewise that the apostolic office has ceased, argue not that the miraculous gifts have ceased as well, but that they continue into the modern age under the authority of the apostolic deposit (Scripture).³³

We will weigh the different arguments in what follows, looking first at the miraculous word gifts and then at the miraculous deed gifts.

Cessationism & Continuationism in the Balance

1. Implications for the Miraculous Word Gifts

Concluding as we have that the apostolic office has ceased and that, consequently, the canon of Scripture is closed, it is right for one to be concerned with how the miraculous word gifts³⁴ are to be viewed today. Cessationists see these gifts as a threat to the sufficiency of Scripture and finality of the canon and claim, therefore, that they have ceased and are no longer operative in the modern age.³⁵ Scripture is all that we need and it is wrong to go looking for something more. Responsible Continuationists understand this threat and the potential for abuse of the miraculous word gifts and seek to put these gifts in their proper place underneath the authority of the inscripturated word.

The “Perfect” of 1 Corinthians 13

A text traditionally referenced³⁶ to argue for the cessation of miraculous word gifts is 1 Corinthians 13:10—“When the perfect comes, the partial (in context, the gifts of prophecy, tongues, knowledge) will pass away.” It has been argued that “the perfect” referred to here is the canon of Scripture and that, therefore, when the last word of Scripture was written and the last apostle died, these gifts passed away.

³² 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:15; 3:16; Jude 3; 2 Pet 1:19-20; 3:16.; see also Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1055.

³³ 2 Tim 1:13-14; see Poythress, “What Are Spiritual Gifts?”, 18-20.

³⁴ I will be dealing primarily with prophecy here as the other miraculous word gifts (tongues, interpretation of tongues, words of wisdom, words of knowledge) can all be essentially subsumed under that category.

³⁵ See Gaffin, *Perspectives*, 100; and Gaffin in *Gifts for Today?*, 42.

³⁶ Though not by the more thoughtful Cessationists like Dr. Richard Gaffin whose argument we will look at shortly.

Richard Gaffin, however, though a strong Cessationist, can see plainly from the context that this verse cannot support his position: “The coming of ‘the perfect’ (v. 10) and the ‘then’ of the believer’s full knowledge (v. 12) no doubt refer to the time of Christ’s return. The view that they describe the point at which the New Testament canon is completed cannot be made credible exegetically.”³⁷

Gaffin tries to argue that the text is rather inconclusive for either position: “The time of the cessation of prophecy and tongues is an open question so far as this passage is concerned.”³⁸ But this conclusion is simply unfounded and untrue! For the text is explicit as to the point when the gifts will cease: “*When the perfect comes*, the partial will pass away” (v. 10, emphasis mine). If we grant, as we saw that even Gaffin does, that the “perfect” is the second coming of Christ, when we shall see Him “face to face” (v. 12), then we have here not some indeterminate statement about the cessation of imperfect gifts, but a decisive one: they shall pass away when the perfect, namely Jesus, comes!³⁹

Ironically, the very text many point to in order to argue for Cessationism provides a more convincing argument for Continuationism!

If we need further evidence of this conclusion, all we must do is go back to the beginning of this very same letter. For here Paul gives thanks to God that the gospel was confirmed to the Corinthians—“so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, *as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...*”⁴⁰ As the spiritual gifts were spoken of in relation to Christ’s return in chapter 13, here we see a parallel and confirming logic. It can be plainly noted that all the spiritual gifts are present (“not lacking in any...”) and that Paul expects this to be the case until the return of Christ. What more needs to be said on the matter?

The “Foundation” of Ephesians 2:20

Gaffin may not find decisive evidence for his position in 1 Corinthians 13, but he does in Ephesians 2:20, where Paul states that the church is “...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”⁴¹ The argument links both the apostles and prophets (clearly New Testament prophets when seen with 3:5) to the foundation of the church, inferring that the gift of prophecy ceased alongside the gift of apostleship and is no longer operative in the church. Moreover, the New Testament prophets here in this text seems to be speaking the very words of God in the same way the Old Testament prophets and New Testament Apostles would and, therefore, to allow for prophecy in this modern age is to throw the canon open for new revelation and words of God.

Certainly, if all New Testament prophecy was to be understood as technically inspired and divinely authoritative, most all moderate Continuationists would pack up for the Cessationist camp. But a case can be made that either:

- The grammatical construction of the phrase “the apostles and prophets” (with only one definite article) refers to one and the same group of people—“the apostles who are also prophets”—and so does not include the non-apostolic prophets;
- Or these prophets do not represent all in the New Testament who had the gift of prophecy but a very limited group who were part of the foundation of the church, closely connected with the apostles, and given unique revelation into the mystery of God’s inclusion of the Gentiles (3:4-6).⁴²

I prefer the latter interpretation, though Grudem favors the former.

³⁷ Gaffin, *Perspectives*, 109.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁹ See Piper, “Signs and Wonders.”

⁴⁰ 1 Cor 1:7, emphasis mine

⁴¹ Gaffin, *Perspectives*, 93-102.

⁴² See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1051.

It seems that Cessationists assume all prophecy to be equivalent to the inscripturated word and, thus, blanket reject it as a possibility for our day. But what if there was another category for such revelations in the Spirit that didn't put them on par with the canon nor denigrate them as devilish lies? Do the Scriptures give us reason to think such a category exists? I think they do!

The Case for Another Category of Prophecy

There are plenty of reasons for thinking that New Testament prophecy, apart maybe from these foundational prophets mentioned in Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5, had lesser authority than that of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament Apostles; that it involved something valuable for the church, but still fallible and in need of testing by the standard of the infallible words of Scripture. I will give you only a sampling of these reasons here:

(1) The ubiquity of New Testament prophets.

The sheer number of people in the New Testament described as prophets or shown to be prophesying is so vast that it makes it difficult to carry over and apply the same authority to these people that men like Jeremiah or Isaiah had in the Old Testament. On the day of Pentecost, Peter's quotation from Hosea in Acts 2:17-18 alludes to this when it speaks of God's pouring out His Spirit on all flesh, causing sons and daughters, young and old men, and male and female servants to prophesy, see visions, and have dreams. Are we to understand these prophets as having the same authority as the Old Testament prophets? Could this not be indicating that, in the New Covenant, every believer becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit, a son of the Living God, and, as such, new possibilities for communion with Him have opened up?!

Interesting in relation to our discussion of Ephesians 2:20 is the account in Acts 19:1-7 where Paul comes to Ephesus, baptizes about twelve men, lays his hands on them, and "the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying" (v. 6). Are we to understand these twelve men have the foundational authority he was writing about in Ephesians 2:20, equal to the apostles? Were these prophecies inscripturated and kept for the church as the words of God? Obviously not.

(2) Weighing prophecies.

It seems that we are told to weigh prophecies according to Apostolic revelation, thus showing New Testament prophecy to be subordinate, not equal, to the apostolic deposit.⁴³ Given the process that is described for us in 1 Corinthians 14, with church members weighing what was prophesied and subjecting it to a standard or test, I couldn't help but imagine how this would look in the Old Testament context. Can you imagine the case where Isaiah speaks and people weigh it to discern if it is true?! Isaiah spoke and it was true because He spoke with divine authority!⁴⁴ His words were the standard to which all else was to conform!

(3) Prophesying in proportion to our faith.

In Rom 12:6 Paul encourages those with the gift of prophecy to prophesy "...in proportion to our faith." What does this mean? It seems that he is talking here not to foundational prophets but to a more ordinary class. This would seem to indicate the possibility of learning or growing in the prophetic gift in the same way that one might grow in service, teaching, etc.

(4) Paul disobeys!

In Acts 21:1-14 Paul is entreated by some disciples in Tyre "through the Spirit" (v. 4) not to go on to Jerusalem because it had been prophetically revealed to them that persecution awaited him there. Agabus comes in v. 10

⁴³ 1 Cor 14:29-32, 36-8; 1 Thess 5:19-22

⁴⁴ Isa 55:11

and confirms the revelation. It seems even Luke (“we” in v. 12) is included in those who “urged him not to go up to Jerusalem” (v. 12). But Paul disobeys!

Disobeying a prophet in the Old Testament was a sure way to win the wrath of God. Clearly there is something less authoritative than Old Testament prophecy going on here. In fact, Paul himself had already received revelation from the Spirit about what awaited him in Jerusalem. Moreover, it was the Holy Spirit that was constraining him, not to stay, but to go!⁴⁵ So we have here a case in which a true revelation from God was given false interpretation by the fallible instrument (the New Testament prophet). Even more interesting, Paul does not condemn these disciples as false prophets, indicating the probable existence of a “third category” of prophecy between the divinely inspired, all-authoritative and the satanically false.⁴⁶

A Definition of New Testament Prophecy & Concluding Remarks

Helpful now, as we conclude, is John Piper’s definition of the New Testament gift of prophecy:

Prophecy in this ‘third category’...is a regulated message or report in human words usually made to the gathered believers based on a spontaneous, personal revelation from the Holy Spirit for the purpose of edification, encouragement, consolation, conviction or guidance, but not necessarily free from a mixture of human error, and thus needing assessment on the basis of the apostolic (Biblical) teaching and mature spiritual wisdom.⁴⁷

The whole issue between Cessationists and Continuationists at this point is over the existence of this “third category” of revelation. Cessationists only see two categories: true or false. Continuationists see that the Scriptures allow for this middle ground.⁴⁸

Cessationists, focusing on the supposed *source* of such prophecy (namely, God), assume that any word that comes to someone in a prophetic (miraculous, non-inferential) nature must be infallible and on par with special revelation⁴⁹. But Continuationists, while recognizing the source, see also the role of the *instrument* (namely, man), and allow for the fallibility of man to create this mixed, third category of revelation. We understand that God chose in His Apostles (and perhaps at times in the foundational prophets) to override the fallibility of the human instrument and so communicate His message through them infallibly.⁵⁰ Today, though He is still able to communicate of His word and will for us (whether through dream, vision, impression, sermon, counsel, etc.), it comes to and through fallible instruments and thus should always be brought back to and tested by the infallible words of Scripture.

Interestingly, this is true not only of the miraculous word gifts (prophecy) but also of the non-miraculous word gifts (teaching). We are already used to this testing process with regards to listening to a sermon or reading a book. Why should we not apply the same principle to a prophetic word or vision? Poythress points out that, within the circle of apostolic and, hence, canonical authority, both the *inferential* and *non-inferential* gifts were inspired by God and rendered therefore infallible (for both Luke, who collected and ordered evidence in his gospel, and John, who saw visions and wrote them down in the book of Revelation, have given to us the very words of God—the former is not any less inspired or authoritative than the latter).⁵¹ On the other hand, we who are not Apostles or foundational prophets need not assume that a word received non-inferentially is any more inspired or

⁴⁵ Acts 20:22-24

⁴⁶ See Piper, “The New Testament Gift of Prophecy”; and Poythress, “Modern Spiritual Gifts,” 18-19

⁴⁷ Piper, “The New Testament Gift of Prophecy.”

⁴⁸ Piper calls it a “third category” of prophecy; Grudem calls it “congregational” prophecy; Poythress calls it “analogous” or “mixed” prophecy (though he might hesitate to use the label “prophecy”).

⁴⁹ Murray, *Collected Writings*, 187.

⁵⁰ 1 Thess 2:13

⁵¹ Poythress, “Modern Spiritual Gifts,” 4-9.

authoritative than a word received inferentially. Both are fallible because of our own fallibility and ought to be brought back to and tested by the infallible words of God in the Bible.

2. Implications for the Miraculous Deed Gifts

Cessationists tie more than just the miraculous word gifts to the Apostolic office and age. They make the case that miraculous deed gifts also were only for that foundational period—serving as “signs of a true apostle,”⁵² and indicating to the world God’s approbation of them and their message—and have since ceased from the life of the church.

Probably, the conclusion to be drawn is that as listed in 1 Corinthians 12 (vv. 9f. and 29f.) and encountered throughout the narrative in Acts, these gifts, particularly when exercised regularly by a given individual, are part of the foundational structure of the church. They are among the ‘signs of the apostle’ in the broader sense indicated above and so have passed out of the life of the church.”⁵³

To make such a sweeping statement that miraculous gifts have “passed out of the life of the church,” one would expect there to be a host of evidence supporting this. But the trembling foundation here is evident in Gaffin’s “Probably...” at the beginning of his statement. The Scriptural evidence is by no means clear that these things were to stop. In fact there are many reasons for us to assume their continuation!

Let us hear from Martin Lloyd-Jones on the matter: “It is perfectly clear that in New Testament times, the gospel was authenticated in this way by signs, wonders and miracles of various characters and descriptions . . . Was it only meant to be true of the early church? . . . The Scriptures never anywhere say that these things were only temporary—never! There is no such statement anywhere.”⁵⁴ He is right. To come to the Cessationist position requires many theological leaps—leaps I am not willing to take.

Arguments for the Continuation of the Miraculous Deed Gifts

Consider, then, a few brief arguments for the continuation of the miraculous deed gifts into the modern age:

(1) *Miracles were signs given by God not merely to vindicate the messenger but also their message.*⁵⁵

There is still need today for God to adorn His gospel with visible evidence of the in-breaking of His kingdom! God may have performed signs and wonders through the Apostles, but this in no way means that these miracles were only for the Apostles. To the contrary, many outside of the Apostles and apostolic circle were given such gifts as a confirmation of the gospel’s power and the in-breaking of the kingdom of God into their lives!⁵⁶

(2) *Miracles were for the edification of God’s church.*⁵⁷

It’s clear from texts dealing with the spiritual gifts that they were all given to the church, not only to vindicate the apostles and their message, but to aid in the building up of the body in love! The Corinthians, for example, were encouraged to eagerly pursue the gifts that most served the purpose of love.⁵⁸ These gifts play an important part in us fulfilling the royal law that Christ laid down in Scripture which is in need of perpetual fulfillment even in our day. Therefore, we mustn’t set aside any of the spiritual gifts, no matter how foreign or fantastic they seem, but pick them up for the cause of love.

⁵² 2 Cor 12:12

⁵³ Gaffin, *Perspectives*, 113-4.

⁵⁴ Piper, quoting Lloyd-Jones in “Signs and Wonders.”

⁵⁵ Luke 9:1-2; Acts 14:3; 1 Cor 1:6-7

⁵⁶ Luke 9:1-2; 1 Cor 1:6-7; Gal 3:5; 1 Thess 1:5

⁵⁷ 1 Cor 12:7; 14:5, 12, 17, 26; Eph 4:9-16

⁵⁸ 1 Cor 14:1-5, 19

(3) *Miracles were for the reaching of the lost.*⁵⁹

Organically connected to the arguments above, signs and wonders are meant by God to adorn the message of the gospel, not only for edification of the church, but also for the saving of the lost! We see the disciples praying for miracles to accompany their preaching in Acts 4:29-30 which leaves us to ask: shouldn't we be doing the same? Miracles, when put in their proper place as an adornment to and not a replacement of the gospel, help the church to fulfill the great commission which is still in need of fulfillment in our day. We must not cast off the tools God has given us for our work in the field!

(4) *Miracles were for the glory of God!*

All of these previous arguments find this as their ultimate end. God desires to show Himself powerful in the gospel of His Son as it is cherished in the church and carried to the world. These miracles are not ends in themselves, but signs pointing us to the glorious and good God who reigns over heaven and earth and over the hearts of all who would bow their knee to Him.

Concluding Remarks

It seems Cessationists have focused intently on one purpose for the miraculous deed gifts while neglecting the other purposes for which God designed them. I fear that to conclude these gifts have ceased without the clear textual evidence of such a thing is to rob our ministry to the church of nutrient, our ministry to the world of allurements, and our "ministry" to God of His rightful glory!

Conclusion

I hope to have made a strong case here for the continuation of miraculous spiritual gifts (both word and deed) through the apostolic age and into our day. They were meant by God to serve purposes still guiding the march of the church's mission today—the adornment and vindication of the gospel of His Son; the edification and encouragement of His church; the attraction and salvation of the lost; and the glorification of Himself as the ultimate Prophet, Priest, and King. The abuses of such gifts throughout church history (legion as they have been) calls not for cessation but instruction.⁶⁰ May we wisely instruct our churches in the proper use of these gifts as they operate now in our day upon the infallible foundation laid for us by the Apostles.

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⁵⁹ Luke 18:43; Acts 9:34-35, 40,42

⁶⁰ 1 Cor 14:39; 1 Thess 5:19-20

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Affirmations

Based on our understanding of Biblical teachings, we affirm the following:

1. Both Adam and Eve were created in God's image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood (Genesis 1:26-27, 2:18).
2. Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart (Genesis 2:18, 21-24; I Corinthians 11:7-9; I Timothy 2:12-14).
3. Adam's headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall, and was not a result of sin (Genesis 2:16-18, 21-24; 3:1-13; I Corinthians 11:7-9).
4. The Fall introduced distortions into the relationships between men and women (Genesis 3:1-7, 12, 16).
 - a. In the home, the husband's loving, humble headship tends to be replaced by domination or passivity; the wife's intelligent, willing submission tends to be replaced by usurpation or servility.
 - b. In the church, sin inclines men toward a worldly love of power or an abdication of spiritual responsibility, and inclines women to resist limitations on their roles or to neglect the use of their gifts in appropriate ministries.
5. The Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, manifests the equally high value and dignity which God attached to the roles of both men and women (Genesis 1:21-27, 2:18; Galatians 3:28). Both Old and New Testaments also affirm the principle of male headship in the family and in the covenant community (Genesis 2:18; Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-19; I Timothy 2:11-15).
6. Redemption in Christ aims at removing the distortions introduced by the curse.
 - a. In the family, husbands should forsake harsh or selfish leadership and grow in love and care for their wives; wives should forsake resistance to their husbands' authority and grow in willing, joyful submission to their husbands' leadership (Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-19; Titus 2:2-5; I Peter 3:1-7).
 - b. In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men (Galatians 3:28; I Corinthians 11:2-16; I Timothy 2:11-15).
7. In all of life Christ is the supreme authority and guide for men and women, so that no earthly submission—domestic, religious, or civil—ever implies a mandate to follow a human authority into sin (Daniel 3:10-18; Acts 4:19-20, 5:27-29; I Peter 3:1-2).
8. In both men and women a heartfelt sense of call to ministry should never be used to set aside Biblical criteria for particular ministries (I Timothy 2:11-15, 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Rather, Biblical teaching should remain the authority for testing our subjective discernment of God's will.
9. With half the world's population outside the reach of indigenous evangelism; with countless other lost people in those societies that have heard the gospel; with the stresses and miseries of sickness, malnutrition, homelessness, illiteracy, ignorance, aging, addiction, crime, incarceration, neuroses, and loneliness, no man or woman who feels a passion from God to make His grace known in word and deed need ever live without a fulfilling ministry for the glory of Christ and the good of this fallen world (I Corinthians 12:7-21).
10. We are convinced that a denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.

The "Danvers Statement" was prepared by several evangelical leaders at a CBMW meeting in Danvers, Mass., in December, 1987. It was first published in final form by the CBMW in Wheaton, Ill., in November, 1988.

Remember that at one time you Gentiles . . . were . . . separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Ephesians 2:11–19

Creation and the Cosmic Symphony

The Bible opens with a sort of cosmic symphony. With God as Conductor, the universe is born. And with each day of creation a common refrain is repeated again and again: “And God saw that it was good” (6x).

Divine Dissonance

But all of this sets us up for the moment when the whole cadence of creation is thrown off, and this jarring dissonance is introduced in Genesis 2:18, when God looks at Adam and says: “It is not good that the man should be alone.” There’s an awkwardness to all of this. God is good. What He makes is good. How in the world could He have missed this one? Shouldn’t omniscience have come through for Him here?

We can be confident that God did not miss this. He is only wanting to make sure that we don’t miss this. There’s a point He’s trying to make for us here. By creating this awkward dissonance (and it gets even more awkward, with God parading the animals before Adam as potential partners), God is drawing our attention to a simple yet significant fact: human beings need to be in community.

As God is in community within Himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—so man created in God’s image needs to be in community—therefore “male and female He created them” (1:27). And when at last man has woman we can return to 1:31 to hear God’s declaration over it all: “[B]ehold, it was very good.”

Human Dissonance

But, into this divine symphony, man introduces a dissonance of his own. When Adam and Eve turn from God it’s as if they take a hammer to the mirror of God’s image in them. And it shatters. And when it shatters, it doesn’t just shatter in the vertical, but in the horizontal. When man breaks community with God, he also breaks it with woman—“The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (3:12).

There’s a dividing wall of hostility raised between us and God, raised between individuals (Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel), and, later, raised even between whole nations (Jews and Gentiles).

We live in this reality every day! It's why we have locks on our front doors. It's why we do background checks for our kids ministry volunteers. It's why even neighbors so often rush past one another on the sidewalk without ever even saying hello. We're estranged from family, from neighbor, from nations. Man is alone, and it is not good.

Redemption and the Package Deal of Reconciliation

But we have a good God don't we?! It was our sin that separated us. So He made His Son to be sin on our behalf. In some mysterious way, God breaks community with Himself—the Father against the Son—that we might be brought back into community with God and with one another!

Read Ephesians 2:13-14 again: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility."

The most striking feature of Ephesians 2 is that reconciliation is a package deal. To be reconciled to God is also to be reconciled to one another. To be brought near to God in the vertical is to have the dividing wall of hostility removed in the horizontal. When you get the former, you get the latter. And you can't get the one without the other. You can't have the Father if you won't take the Gentile!

You can't have the Father if you won't take the Gentile!

Here is where it again becomes so plain that our values are a part of an interconnected ecosystem. Faith gives way to Community. Or as Ray Ortlund puts it in his little book *The Gospel*: "Gospel doctrine creates a gospel culture."¹ Or as I've stated it now so many times: We are a *cross-centered* and *cross-cultured* church.

The love that God has shown us in the gospel, is the same kind of love we start to show one another.

Consummation and the Nucleus of God's New Creation

And it gets even more amazing. God's ultimate goal of cosmic reconciliation—"to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10)—begins in the church. It begins right here in this room, with these people. We are the nucleus of God's new creation.

That's why all of the earth is described as looking to the church—creation is "longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom 8:19). And it's why all of heaven is looking to the church—"angels long to look" into what's going on here (1 Pet 1:12; cf. Eph 3:10). What God is beginning here with us will one day envelope the universe!

How could we drink from the cool streams of his grace and then turn and spit acid on one another?!

O brothers and sisters, what kind of community ought we then to be?! Ephesians 2 makes it plain: the great goal of God in the cross was not merely that we be reconciled to Him, but that we be also reconciled to one another. This means, on a sadder note, that when we move against this momentum—when we turn coldly from our spouse

¹ (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 21.

in the bed, when we harden our hearts against our brother or sister in Christ, when we compete and gossip behind one another's back—we stand in opposition not only to the other person, but to God Himself who has given His very Son that we might be reconciled with one another! How could we drink from the cool streams of his grace and then turn and spit acid on one another?! May such a thing never be in our church!

We praise God that there are so many tribes, tongues, peoples, and nations represented even in our little church, and that we enjoy rich, reconciled community with one another, uniting around the cross. By His grace, may it only grow richer!

Our value of Community at Mercy Hill informs our Passions. Below are two Passions that flow out from this value.

1. Gospel Humility

There are few things that we are more passionate about cultivating in this church than this: Gospel Humility. As far as we can tell, a church will live or die on this point. Are we going to bicker and bite, compete and divide? Or are we going to humble ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him?!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, quotes from Luke's gospel and then proceeds with a warning for the church:

"There arose a reasoning [or 'argument'] among them, which of them should be the greatest" (Luke 9:46). We know who it is that sows this thought in the Christian community. But perhaps we do not bear in mind enough that no Christian community ever comes together without this thought immediately emerging as a seed of discord. Thus at the very beginning of Christian fellowship there is engendered an invisible, often unconscious, life-and-death contest. "There arose a reasoning among them": this is enough to destroy a fellowship.

Hence it is vitally necessary that every Christian community from the very outset face this dangerous enemy squarely, and eradicate it. There is no time to lose here, for from the first moment when a man meets another person he is looking for a strategic position he can assume and hold over against that person. . . . [It] can occur in the most polite or even pious environment. . . . It is the struggle of the natural man for self-justification. He finds it only in comparing himself with others, in condemning and judging others.¹

What are we to do with this? How do we resist this massive threat to Christian community? How does the church "face this dangerous enemy squarely, and eradicate it"? Answer: Gospel Humility.

To flesh this out, consider a quote from Greg Gilbert: "Unity lives where self-regard dies, and self-regard dies at the foot of the cross." We will be united (community) only where self-regard dies (humility), and self-regard dies at the foot of the cross (gospel).

Let's walk back up his thought for a minute.

1. At the Foot of the Cross, Self-Regard Dies.

Self-regard, pride, works in two different directions:

1. We commonly think of it, on the one hand, as a *high* regard for self—"Aren't I great?!"
2. But it is of the same essence, on the other hand, when one has such *low* regard for self—"Aren't I horrible?!"

In both cases it is that all of life is orbiting around self.

Brothers and sisters, if we still have regard for self after gazing upon the cross of Christ, we either have not yet seen the cross for what it truly is, or we have strayed dangerously far from it and are in desperate need of returning back.

¹ (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1954), 90-91.

The cross will not let us have self-regard on either side of the balance. If I have high regard for self, the cross says I am a horror—so shot through with sin that, for God to even look upon me again, the beloved Son had to die. But, if I have low regard for self, the cross says I am a treasure—so cherished that, to bring me back home to God, the beloved Son chose to die.

O, friends, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. No one is more loveable than another here. No one is more loathsome than another here. All of your goodness can't endear you. All of your badness can't disqualify you. God's grace is no respecter of persons. Its concern is not for you on either side of the balance, but only where you stand in relation to Christ!

And self-regard just dies right there! It's no longer about us at all. It's about Him!

2. Where Self-Regard Dies, Unity Lives!

And as self-regard dies at the foot of the cross, true Christian unity and community comes alive! Like compost in the soil, the decaying of my pride, feeds the root of our fellowship!

And what happens when a community has lost regard for self? They can finally have regard for one another.

As Bonhoeffer comes out in the conclusion of his thought: "Self-justification and judging others go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together."²

Unity lives where self-regard dies, and self-regard dies at the foot of the cross.

Gilbert's flow of thought really just follows the Apostle Paul's in Philippians 2:1-8:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Unity in our community will come from *humility*, but humility will be formed in us only by the *gospel*. We are passionate about Gospel Humility in this church.

2. Every-Member Ministry

We must not think that because we are all humbled by the cross of Christ that we are all therefore irrelevant to the mission of Christ. No! He humbles us so that He can use us.

We are of little use to the kingdom so long as we think we are of great use. It is only when we have given up on our own strength and purpose that we can at last be reinvigorated with His. He can start using us because we stop

² Ibid., 91.

fighting back. To come under Christ is not to sit ourselves down on the bench so much as it is to finally be put in the game.

With Christ as our Head, we become a member of His body, and in His body, every part plays a vital role. Far from irrelevant to the mission of Christ in this church, you are vital to it.

This is the Paul's great burden in 1 Corinthians 12:

[T]here are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . .

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (vv. 4-7, 14-20)

Some people approach the church like those guys in the gym that think every day is biceps day. The ladies don't dig big calves like they dig big biceps, so . . . every day is biceps day. But after months, even years, of this, the guys start to look ridiculous. They have these massive tree-branch arms and these tiny twig legs. If you got in a fight, all you'd have to do is kick his shins and he would just topple over.

Well, some people approach the church like this. The work of the church is to be done by a few of its members. They might think this for a number of reasons:

- Maybe they're the bicep and they're proud—"Stand back, I got this!"
- Maybe they're not the bicep and they're lazy—"Pass out the popcorn and let me just veg."
- Or maybe they're broken and depressed and feel like others need to do it because if they try they're just going to screw it up.

Whatever the case, every day is biceps day. So Christ's body gets all disproportional and disfigured. And we have the appearance of strength but we're fundamentally weak.

Brothers and sister, may it never be with us! Every member matters.

The call of the pastor or the Elder or the leader is not so much to do all the heavy lifting as it is to equip every member to lift together: "He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12).

It is only as every member is playing a vital role that the body as a whole is made strong. Paul goes on to say that this is how we stop being "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (v. 14). Satan can't just come and kick our shins, because every member is involved in this thing.

So this a call for the proud to let others into the work. You are not God's gift to the church. Every member is God's gift to the church. This is a call for the lazy to get off the couch. God didn't save you to be a spectator, but a soldier. You are needed in this church. This is a call for the depressed to "shake yourself from the dust and arise" (Isa 52:2). The Spirit of Christ is in you. Have no fear! "[F]or God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love" (2 Tim 1:7). This is a call for Every-Member Ministry.

The church, it would seem from the Scriptures, is given two perpetual offices by her Savior: namely, that of the Elder and the Deacon. Together Elders and Deacons represent Christ's ongoing and comprehensive care for the church and world. There are many ways we could come at this, but it might be interesting to: first, trace the origin of these two offices; second, identify their general function in the church; and then finally make our way towards a working definition.

1. Jesus

Any discussion of authority in the church has to start with Jesus. He is the Head (Col 1:18), the Cornerstone (Eph 2:20), the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4). All authority we are given in the church is derived from Him. So we can learn what leadership in the church ought to look like by looking at how Jesus led. And as we look at Him we recognize that He came to His people as a servant-leader. And He came as a servant-leader concerned primarily with the ministry of two things: *word* and *deed*.

That's why, Matthew describes our Lord's entrance into public ministry in this way: "He went throughout all Galilee, *teaching* in their synagogues and *proclaiming* the gospel of the kingdom and *healing* every disease and every affliction among the people" (Matt 4:23). Word and deed. Truth and love. When Christ walked the earth, He did not merely proclaim the Kingdom, He presented and produced it. His preaching was confirmed with power. God is not just all talk. His checks don't bounce. When He says He's coming to love, to heal, to free, to save, that's what He does. And Jesus seals this once and for all in His death and resurrection.

2. The Apostles

And then this authority and ministry of Christ starts to pass to the church. Luke makes the connection between the word and deed ministry of Christ with that of the early church when he writes: "In the first book [the gospel of Luke], O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus *began to do and teach*, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen" (Acts 1:1–2).

The implication of Luke's statement is twofold for our discussion here:

1. First, if Luke's gospel only records what Jesus began to do and teach, then the book of Acts must record what Jesus continues to do and teach.
2. But, second, this doing and teaching, this word and deed ministry, would now be by Christ's Spirit in and through the church, particularly in and through "the apostles whom he had chosen." Here is the first form of official leadership established by Christ in the New Testament church.

But something happens in Acts 6. The church has grown. It's grown so big in fact that the Apostles cannot possibly head up both the word and deed ministries in the church. The gospel they were preaching was being contradicted in the community as Greek widows were not being cared for like those of the Hebrews. When gospel word is not accompanied by gospel deed, the very gospel itself is at stake. So, we read that "the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word'" (vv. 2–4).

"We need another office to take up the *deed* ministry, because we can't neglect the *word* ministry." And because of this new appointment of some to official leadership, we go on to read: "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem" (v. 7).

3. Elders and Deacons

Now, this vignette has critical implications for official leadership as it comes to be developed in the church.

The Apostles, commissioned here to minister the word in particular, are seen in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 handing off this ministry to Elders. This accounts for the one qualification that particularly distinguishes an Elder from a Deacon: He must be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2); and “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9). He must be able to take the apostolic word and proclaim it to the church.

The office of Deacon, on the other hand, is understood by many as having its roots in this original group of seven appointed to serve the church in gospel deed. Deacon (Gk. *diakonos*), after all, means *servant*. They are appointed to both *liberate* the Elders to focus on the broader ministry of the word and to *legitimize* that ministry of the word by serving and loving those under the Elders’ care. They exist to help the church make sure she isn’t just all talk, that the church’s checks don’t bounce, that the gospel has hands and feet, that we don’t say, “Be warm and filled in the name of Jesus” while we send them away cold and empty (Jas 2:16).

To put definitions on these two offices at this point:

Elders are under-shepherds of Christ, appointed by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to serve by leading, especially in the ministry of gospel word.

Deacons are assistants to the Elders, appointed by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to lead by serving, especially in the ministry of gospel deed.

It is a devastating thing that when so many think of church leadership the first thing that comes to mind is hypocrisy. God actually designed and established church leadership for precisely the opposite reason! They are to keep the church from hypocrisy. Gospel word without Gospel deed is unloving. Gospel deed without gospel word is untrue. But Gospel word plus Gospel deed is Christ. And so God establishes Elders and Deacons to help the church more effectively represent Christ to the world!

Gospel word without Gospel deed is unloving. Gospel deed without gospel word is untrue. But Gospel word plus Gospel deed is Christ.

In all of this, we are not taking away from our passion for Every-Member Ministry (see Expansion 10). The church as a whole is commissioned by God to participate in this ministry of word and deed (1 Pet 4:10-11). But God gives official leadership to help organize, equip, and stimulate such ministry in all the members.

Philippians 1:1 puts a nice cap on this discussion. Paul begins his letter to the church this way: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...” In the church you have the *saints* (members), who are under care of *overseers* (synonymous elsewhere with Elders) and *deacons*, who were given their authority from *Apostles* like Paul, who is himself a servant of, under the authority of, *Christ Jesus*.

Can Women Teach in the Church?

The following has been adapted from an article¹ written by Dr. J.D. Greear, pastor of The Summit Church, in Raleigh-Durham, NC. Its contents have only been slightly modified to suit our context.

Introduction of the Issue

In 1 Timothy 2:12 the Apostle Paul commands that a woman is forbidden to “teach or to exercise authority over a man” in the church. Some suggest that Paul only had one situation in one church in mind, where the women were unruly. But the reasoning Paul uses—that man was created first, then Eve; and that she was deceived first, while he overtly rebelled first—excludes such a possibility. Paul bases his rule for Timothy’s church in the created order, which means it applies to all churches.

The grammar Paul uses indicates that he has in mind two things he wishes to forbid, teaching and authority (we find Andreas Köstenberger’s grammatical analysis² compelling here). In other words, Paul was not only saying that a woman could not rule as an Elder, but that there is a certain kind of teaching she must not do in the assembled church.

But it is clear, however, that women are given the gift and responsibility to teach in God’s kingdom. Certainly, as Paul commands in Titus, they are to teach other women (Titus 2:3–5). Throughout the Bible, however, we see women instructing and exhorting mixed audiences also, both publicly and privately. In the Old Testament, Deborah dispensed wisdom to Israel by her tree (Judg 4:4), and both Miriam’s and Deborah’s songs were given publicly to instruct and edify Israel (Exod 15; Judg 5). In the New Testament, Priscilla, together with her husband, tutored Apollos (Acts 18:26). Women prophesied publicly in the New Testament church (Acts 2:11, 17; 1 Cor 11:5; 14:26), and the whole congregation, men included, learned from those prophecies (1 Cor 14:31; Rom 15:14). Furthermore, Paul commands the congregation to admonish and teach one another, and these “one another” commands are given without gender distinction (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19–20;³ 1 Cor 14:28).

Thus, almost all Complementarians concede that women can and should “teach” in the church in some way—that is, if “teach” is defined as the explanation of gospel content or exhortations to believe and obey it. It is only a certain *kind* of teaching that is forbidden to women. For example, John Piper, who is among the most conservative of Complementarians, says, “In context, I think [1 Tim 2:12] means that women shouldn’t be the authoritative teachers of the church, i.e. they shouldn’t be Elders.” Piper goes on to say, however, that women like Beth Moore and Elisabeth Elliot should be free to write, speak and teach publicly, and that men can and should learn from them—he himself has. About the ministry of Elisabeth Elliot, whom he calls the “Beth Moore” of his generation, he says, “I love it! Sock it to them Elisabeth! She was so in your face about laying your life down and being radically obedient and totally committed.”⁴

Other conservative Complementarians permit a woman to give a testimony in church, even during the Sunday service, and even if her address is filled with the explanation of gospel content and exhortations to obey that

¹ http://www.jdgreear.com/my_weblog/2015/05/can-women-teach-in-the-church.html.

² <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2008/07/30/interview-with-andreas-j-kostenberger-on/>.

³ In Ephesians 5, Paul is about to go into one of the clearest explanations of gender distinction in the Bible. His admonition to address one another in vv. 19–20 comes before he makes that distinction.

⁴ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/is-it-wrong-for-men-to-listen-to-female-speakers-55118/>.

content. However, as one pastor told me recently, she should not do so “in or as the sermon.” Women can, and should, however, he says, admonish others in church—even other men—to obey (Romans 15:14).

What Kind of Teaching is Reserved Only for Men in the Church?

What kind of teaching, then, is forbidden to women? Here are three possible answers:

Answer 1: Any Public Teaching in the Church

In this view, women can teach informally, as Priscilla did with Apollos, or in the context of group discussion (as might occur in a small group). Her “teaching” must never, however, happen in the formal setting of the church assembled or in the public ministry of the church.

The problem with this answer is that Scripture presents us with so many women publicly explaining, exhorting, and edifying God’s people. The substance of what they shared can only be called “teaching.” Their public addresses were filled with explanations of content and exhortations to repent and believe. For example, both Miriam and Deborah instructed and exhorted through prophetic lyric. The women in the Corinthian church gave prophecies, hymns, lessons, or revelations in worship services from which men could learn (1 Cor 11:4–5; 14:26–32).

Some Complementarians (like Wayne Grudem) insist that the public prophecies Paul permits to women in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 consist only of *spontaneous* revelations. Paul’s allowance would not, he contends, include her preparing in advance remarks on a passage of Scripture. While we respect Grudem’s interpretation and find his exegesis illuminating, we believe that this perspective on prophecy fails to adequately account for the fullness of its occurrence in the New Testament. Evangelicals have long recognized that “prophecy” includes both “foretelling” (Agabus’ prediction of Paul’s looming troubles [Acts 21:10]) and “forthtelling” (declaring the mighty works of God [as clearly practiced in Acts 2:11, 16]). The latter includes proclaiming what God has done, explaining its significance, and admonishing the hearers to live differently in light of it.

Furthermore, not every prophetic utterance in the Corinthian church appears to be spontaneous. Paul expects believers to come to the worship service with a “hymn, lesson, or revelation,” indicating that God may have put it on their heart throughout the week (1 Cor 14:26). In each sermon I prepare I ask God to help me speak “prophetically,” which includes trusting him both to bring ideas to mind spontaneously while I preach the sermon, and also to guide me *during* my study to specific and timely words of testimony and application for our congregation. Thus, we believe 1 Corinthians 11 means that women can be given “words” of instruction and exhortation for the church at large in their personal study as well. And they must be given space to share those words with the body of Christ.

A blanket prohibition on women teaching publicly would also, we believe, have to extend to a small group or Sunday School class. These may not be an assembly of the entire church, but they are official, instructive assemblies of the church. If Paul’s intention was to disallow women from any public teaching in the church, it is hard to see how his prohibition would not extend to any gathering done in the name of the church. This would mean that they should not share insights into Scripture or admonitions to obey it in *any* mixed gathering of the church.

Other generally accepted practices become problematic by this view, too. If it is true that women should not teach or preach to men in any public capacity in the church, then it must follow that a pastor should never recommend a book to his entire church written by a woman. Nor should a woman be allowed to give a testimony in church that includes explanation of scriptural content or exhorts the hearers to obey, if some of those hearers are men. If she is forthtelling of the mighty works of God (as in Acts 2), and along the way she intentionally explains gospel content, she has sinned. Neither should a woman ever lead in song in church, since song lyrics too have both teaching and exhorting capacity.

Finally, by this rubric, it is difficult to understand why God appointed the songs of certain women (Miriam and Deborah) to publicly edify Israel during the Exodus and the time of the Judges. Even in extraordinary times, would God overturn his created order?

Answer 2: The “Sermon”

Some Complementarians are comfortable with a woman explaining and admonishing in the public gathering of the church, so long as her “teaching” does not take place during “the sermon”. A stark distinction exists, they believe, between what Paul commands of Timothy, “Preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2), and what he encourages for the whole church, “able to instruct one another” (Romans 15:14).

The challenge here is that “the sermon” as such is never defined for us in the Bible. If anything, 1 Corinthians 14:26–32 seems to imply a number of speakers in a New Testament worship service, not an official, specific single-voice slot that occupies the last half of the service in which one man teaches through a given passage. The book of Acts records several of the Apostles’ messages, but we are never given an example of one given in the space of a worship service. Furthermore, nothing in the context of Paul’s admonition to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2 suggests that he has in mind only the thirty minute exposition occurring in the latter half of our worship services, or that 2 Timothy 4:2 has no applications for women.

This is *not* to downplay the importance of the sermon in the church, or to suggest that the kind of teaching Paul has in mind in 1 Timothy 2:12 does not occur most naturally during what we call “the sermon”. The sermon is the centerpiece of our worship services, and we see it as the most crucial component in fulfilling Jesus’ admonition to “teach all things he has commanded” and Paul’s to “preach the word.” We agree with John Piper that “preaching (i.e. the sermon) is the heart of church leadership.”⁵ But because the Bible never gives a proper definition of a sermon (or even uses the word), or formally distinguishes “preaching” from “teaching” (i.e. when does exhortation, which women *can* do, become preaching, which they cannot?), we believe that there is a better way to classify the kind of teaching Paul forbids to women.⁶

Thus, building a *hard and fast* distinction between “preaching” and “teaching”, or between the 30-minute exposition in the latter half of our worship service and every other explanation and admonition moment in the church, is to impose a category on Scripture not introduced by Scripture.

We believe it is unwise to build a rule entirely off of something never defined in Scripture. Thus, we need a more consistent, and more biblical, classification of the *kind* of teaching forbidden to women in the church.

Answer 3: The “Special Office” of Teaching in the Church

By this view, the kind of teaching Paul has in mind in 1 Timothy 2:12, which he restricts to men, is the official, specially recognized office of teaching in church, which bears the authority of the church and fulfills the church’s official responsibility to preserve and pass on the faith from generation to generation (Jude 3).

John Frame and Vern Poythress explain that Reformed churches have long recognized a distinction between “general” and “special” teaching in the church.⁷ General teaching is explanation of content and exhortations to obey, and they believe that women can—and should—do this kind of teaching even during formal, public worship services or in mixed audiences of the church (like a Sunday School class). “Special” teaching is that teaching in a local church that bears the authority of the church, fulfills its responsibility to preserve the faith, and which God calls people to submit to or be removed from that church (Heb 3:7, 17).

⁵ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/should-a-woman-preach-next-sunday?>

⁶ For example, if a woman shares a five-minute reflection on Scripture with admonishments to hear and obey between worship songs, what keeps that from qualifying as “preaching?” If it lasts 50 minutes would it become “preaching?”

⁷ [http://frame-poythress.org/may-women-teach-adult-sunday-school-classes/.](http://frame-poythress.org/may-women-teach-adult-sunday-school-classes/)

When Paul says that women are not to teach or have authority over a man in the church (1 Tim 2:12), or that they should be silent in the worship services (1 Cor 14:34), it is this “special” or official teaching capacity he has in mind. He couldn’t be speaking of the general capacity for teaching, because Scripture encourages—*commands*—women in too many other places to teach in those ways.

While we believe that “teach” and “have authority” are two separate ideas for Paul, the context of Paul’s statement makes clear that the kind of teaching he is forbidding is the teaching that most naturally accords with the office of Elder. Consider this: What exactly is “authority” in the church? It cannot mean unquestioned allegiance to what is taught, since Scripture encourages the congregation to evaluate *any* teaching in the church, even that done by Elders, in light of other Scriptures (Acts 17:11). “Authoritative teaching” in a church is: (1) teaching that is binding for that particular congregation; and (2) the teaching body that comprises that church’s fulfillment of its responsibility to pass on the faith to the next generation. The Elders have the “authority” to remove from that local covenant community (under the consent of the congregation as a whole) those that reject this official teaching of the church (Titus 3:10–11).

This is why “teaching” and “authority” come together most formally in the office of Elder. Paul’s instruction about Elders in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 is the natural outflow of Paul’s command in 2:12 (especially considering that there was no “chapter break” in Paul’s original letter; these sections were part of the same instructive unit). The Elders bear the responsibility to preserve the integrity of the faith in the congregation, as well as to propagate it into the world.

Women are not to occupy that special, authoritative role of teacher in the church, either *formally* or *functionally*. That’s why Paul’s distinction of “teaching” and “authority” as two distinct things in 1 Timothy 2:12 is significant. He is not saying that women can be the primary teachers in the church, so long as they do so as non-Elders. He is saying they should not teach as Elders or in Elder-like ways. To teach like an Elder, even if not officially an Elder, is to go against the spirit of the order Paul expounds in 1 Timothy 2:12–14.

Admittedly, “not teaching in an *Elder-like way*” creates a gray area. But if we are committed to go no further in our restrictions than the Bible does, we must be willing to insist on the principle and allow each congregation to determine how best to apply it. We don’t believe it honors God to erect hedges about the law, however well intentioned these hedges may be. We want to be clear where the Bible is clear, and leave undefined what it leaves undefined.

We believe this rubric to be the most consistent with biblical, and in particular, evangelical, history. Throughout history God has raised up women with incredible teaching and prophetic gifts—in recent years, women like Elisabeth Elliot, Elyse Fitzpatrick, and Beth Moore—who have contributed much to the body of Christ. While these women should never teach as Elders or in Elder-like ways in the church, their public ministries should be encouraged.

Three Practical Questions

Based on this conclusion, three practical questions present themselves:

1. Can a woman teach in a formal church setting, like a large Sunday School class or an evening Bible study?

Yes, but not if she does so in a way that “mimics” the teaching authority of an Elder. Perceptions are important, and if some in the church begin to look to a woman-teacher as their primary shepherd-leader, both she and they have gone into error. Thus, where small groups and Sunday School classes mimic the pastoral functions of the church (responsibility for shepherding, the beginning stages of discipline), we believed mixed-gender groups should be led (or at least co-led) by men.

2. Can a woman teach during the time traditionally called “the sermon” at one of our weekend services?

Yes and No. As we have said, we believe a woman should not teach in a way that mimics the authority of an Elder, and we believe that the sermon is the heart of church leadership. Thus, we have chosen not to allow the women to supply, by herself, the primary teaching component of a weekend service. While we may have women explain and exhort from the “pulpit” during the “sermon” time, we will always do it in a way that communicates that she does not bear the official teaching responsibility of the church. Because of the importance of the sermon in our worship services, we believe having a woman occupy the prime teaching slot would have her teaching in an Elder-like way, even if she isn’t technically an Elder.

3. Can a man work for a woman within the church?

Yes. We do not believe that Paul’s prohibition forbids women from supervising men in certain departments in our church. Such departments work under the authority of the Elders, and the Elders bear the responsibilities of pastoral authority in those departments.

We also do not believe Paul’s instructions mean that women are to be submissive to all men everywhere, or that Paul’s prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12 prohibits women from being authorities over men in the workplace, classroom, or political office. We believe Paul’s admonition in 1 Tim 2:12 only applies to the church. While the creative order exists outside the church, we must stop where Scripture stops.

Concluding Thoughts

We are unashamedly and uncompromisingly complementarian. We affirm without qualification the Danvers Statement⁸ on gender roles in the kingdom of God.

We are concerned to avoid two errors in regards to women’s role in ministry. On the one hand, we do not want to encourage women to do what God has forbidden to them (1 Tim 2:15; Titus 2:3–6). On the other, we must not discourage women from legitimate opportunities God has opened to them in the kingdom of God. Many Complementarians seem only concerned about the former. They want to ensure that women do not do something they shouldn’t do, but do not seem concerned with discouraging women from what they can and should do. As Jen Wilkin says, many women in the church are *“fighting to be seen as necessary beyond children’s ministry and women’s ministry. They are fighting to contribute more than hospitality or a soft voice on the praise team. They are looking for leadership trajectories for women in the local church and finding virtually nothing. They watch their brothers receive advocacy and wonder who will invite them and equip them to lead well.”*⁹ Since more than half of professing believers are women, we want to see them unleashed and empowered to serve in the kingdom of God, while respecting a loving and wise God’s gracious boundaries.

Finally, we want to champion the importance of the role that God has given only to women: mother. Those women whom God has blessed with this role find themselves at the very heart of God’s plan of redemption, fulfilling a role that no man has been given the privilege to share, a role with greater impact on the kingdom of God than perhaps any other.

My mother, a college biology professor, chose to stay home with my sister and I during our grade school years, and she was the most significant factor in the shaping of my faith from childhood. My own wife, who graduated with honors from the University of Virginia, has chosen to stay home with our four children. We have never regretted that decision. We know that by exalting motherhood and teaching a distinction of roles we put ourselves starkly out of step with our culture, but we believe God’s Word is true, given for our good, and to be trusted in every generation.

⁸ <http://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/>.

⁹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/more-pressing-than-women-preachers>.

As a dad of three very capable daughters, and as a pastor of a church where the majority are women (and the single largest demographic breakdown is single women), I long to see women raised up to serve in the body of Christ and unleashed in the mission of God to their full potential. We believe God gives to women every spiritual gift, endows them with their own spiritual authority, and makes them equal partners in the progress of the mission of God into the world.

As in all things, we believe that a disposition of charity toward those who parse these distinctions differently than we do is in order. On this issue, we can agree on principles even where we differ in applications. Above all, we believe that God's Word is good and trustworthy, and that his design for the church will stand throughout time and prosper the church, now and always.

Were Women Deacons?

The following has been adapted from a larger article¹⁰ on church governance written by Dr. John Piper. Its contents have only been slightly modified to suit our context.

Were women Deacons? Probably yes. There are four observations that incline us to think that this office was held by both men and women.

1. The Greek word for Deacon can be masculine or feminine in the same form. So the word does not settle the issue.
2. In the middle of the qualifications for Deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 Paul says, "The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things." This could be the wives of the Deacons, but could also be the women Deacons. The latter is suggested by the fact that no reference to women is made in 3:1-7. Since women were not candidates for the Eldership in the New Testament (1 Timothy 2:12-13) because of its authoritative function in teaching and oversight, the absence of the reference to women in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 would be expected. But this confirms the probability that the reference to women in 3:11 is to women Deacons, not merely to wives of Deacons.
3. The Deacons were distinguished from the Elders in that they were not the governing body in the church nor were they charged with the duty of authoritative teaching. So the role of Deacon seems not to involve anything that Paul taught (in 1 Timothy 2:12 or anywhere else) is inappropriate for women to perform in the church.
4. In Romans Phoebe is very probably called a Deacon. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a Deacon(ess) of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well" (16:1-2).

It appears then that the role of deacon is of such a nature that nothing stands in the way of women's full participation in it. Within the Deaconate itself the way the men and women relate to each other would be guided by the sense of appropriateness growing out of the Biblical teaching of male and female complementarity.

¹⁰ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/rethinking-the-governance-structure-at-bethlehem-baptist-church>

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. . . . For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:11a, 14–21

Partnership Created

How many of us are aware of the breathtaking reality that we have been created for partnership with God?! It sounds almost blasphemous, but it's biblical. Certainly, we do not mean to imply by this that we are in any way equal with God. Far from it. He is the Creator, we are the creature. He is the Potter, we are the clay. He is the Master, we are the slave.

But in an act of amazing condescension and love, we are also partners with Him—called into the holy march of His mission in the world. He doesn't need us to accomplish His purposes, but, amazingly, He wants us with Him in it.

You were created for so much more than the nine to five; than a big house and a picket fence; than family dinners and late night television; than a college degree, a successful career, and a leisurely retirement by the sea. You were created to partner with God on His mission in all of life.

This has been God's design for humanity from the very beginning. When God created man, He immediately put them on His mission. Adam was called to "work and keep" (Gen 2:15) the garden sanctuary of God's presence. Adam and Eve together were to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over [it]" (1:28). They were in essence to move out from Eden with God's Presence, as God's People, for God's Purpose. Or, to use the language of our values, they were to move out with Faith, Community, and Mission.

*You were created for so much more than the nine to five;
than a big house and a picket fence; than family dinners and
late night television; than a college degree, a successful
career, and a leisurely retirement by the sea. You were
created to partner with God on His mission in all of life.*

Partnership Lost

But they abandon Faith in God, break Community with one another, and abort the Mission God gave them in this world. Man breaks partnership with God and goes into business for himself. And the tapestry of creation unravels.

This is the world we live in today. With towers of Babel being erected on every street corner: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4). “Who cares about *His* name?! It’s all about *my* name!”

We mistakenly think that life will be so much better without God breathing over our backs. We think things will finally be fulfilling. But we find that all of this actually has precisely the opposite effect. Life starts to feel mundane and boring, two-dimensional and grayscale. We feel like hamsters in a wheel going around and around but not going anywhere at all.

And even if we are climbing that ladder, getting closer to the top, when we finally get there, while we may be exhilarated for a moment, soon after, an unanticipated objection rises up from inside us: “Is this it? I gave my whole life to get here. I sold my soul to get here. Well now I’m here, and there’s nothing!”

This is why it’s often the guys at the top that are most susceptible to suicide. So many people build up their towers only to jump off them in the end. Dr. Steven Berglas, a UCLA psychologist who counsels executives on success-induced burnout speaks of a growing phenomenon called “success depression”: “People have this notion that ‘If I only make CEO, if I only become the top talent agent, if I make my first million, that will do it, all my insecurities will go poof.’ You hit the pinnacle, then you wake up the next day and you’re still the same insecure [person] you always were.”¹

The success doesn’t alleviate the depression, it aggravates it. Because life is about something so much more, and deep down, we all know it. We were created for partnership with God, to be on His mission, to build for the glory of His name.

Maybe some of you are experiencing this to varying degrees even right now. You’re on a mission alright, but just not God’s. And it’s maddening. It’s oppressive. It’s never enough. It’s depressing. God has so much more for you in Jesus!

Partnership Regained

This is what Paul is identifying for us in 2 Corinthians 5: “He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (v. 15).

Jesus offers us a way out of the downward spiral and back up into the rush of partnership with God. Through the death and resurrection of Christ we have been saved from the tyranny of self. We live for Him now. Or as Paul puts it down in 6:1: “[We] work . . . together with Him.” Life, all of life, is suddenly infused with new meaning, color, and three-dimensionality.

But what exactly does it mean to be on God’s mission? What is it that we are doing? What does it look like to get back into business with God?

¹ <http://www.bykevingray.com/portfolios/why-successful-young-men-commit-suicide/>.

Here's where Ephesians 5:20 comes in to help: "[W]e are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." We are God's ambassadors, His official representatives in this world. He makes His appeal to the world "through us". And His appeal is none other than this: "Be reconciled to God."

Where Adam and Eve were to move out into creation and fill the uninhabited earth with God's glory, now we are to move out into a creation filled with violence, sin, depravity, oppression, and injustice and call its inhabitants back to God's glory: "Be reconciled to God."

God, in His holiness and justice, is furious with the sinner. But God, in great grace and mercy, has poured out His fury upon His Son. It is therefore both "the fear of the Lord" (v. 11) and "the love of Christ" (v. 14) that compels us. We see both God's wrath and God's grace, and we cry out to the world: "Be reconciled to God."

Consider the great evangelist D.L. Moody here:

When Dwight L. Moody was in London during one of his famous evangelistic tours, several British clergymen visited him. They wanted to know how and why this poorly educated American was so effective in winning throngs of people to Christ. Moody took the three men to the window of his hotel room and asked each in turn what he saw. One by one, the men described the people in the park below. Then Moody looked out the window with tears rolling down his cheeks. "What do you see, Mr. Moody?" asked one of the men. "I see countless thousands of souls that will one day spend eternity in hell if they do not find the Savior."²

Is that the window you're looking through?

The Missional Church

It is to the church in particular that God entrusts this "ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18). When we are reconciled to God through Christ (Faith), not only are we reconciled to one another in the church (Community), but we are also given a ministry of reconciliation for the world (Mission). Faith brings us into Community, and our Community is sent out on Mission.

Listen to Richard De Ridder on this:

The church . . . [is] a group which God has called into existence to do something. The marks of the church need to be placed decisively within the framework of the church's mission. This is where they were first set. For in Acts 2:42 the teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers of the newly-formed Spirit-filled and Spirit-enlarged disciple fellowship is described within the missionary context of the Pentecost story from which it cannot be extracted.³

They were reconciled to God, reconciled to one another, to go out and call the world into the same!

Hear Charles Spurgeon on this same point:

We ought to regard the Christian Church, not as a luxurious hostelry where Christian gentlemen may each one dwell at his ease in his own inn, but as a barracks in which soldiers are gathered together to be drilled and trained for war. We should regard the Christian church not as an association for mutual admiration

² *Today in the Word*, Feb 1, 1997, 6.

³ As quoted by Harvie Conn in *Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1982), 35.

and comfort, but as an army with banners, marching to the fray to achieve victories for Christ, to storm the strongholds of the foe and to add province after province to the Redeemer's kingdom.⁴

We are not huddling together, hoping to make it to heaven with as few bumps as possible. We are storming the gates of hell and calling for the release of prisoners in Jesus' name! We have been reconciled to reconcile; saved to save; freed to free; loved to love; blessed to bless. And if we die we die, because to lose my life for His sake is to finally find it (Matt 10:39)!

We value Mission in this church.

We have been reconciled to reconcile; saved to save; freed to free; loved to love; blessed to bless. And if we die we die, because to lose my life for His sake is to finally find it!

⁴ *The Soul Winner* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1963), 203-204.

Our value of Mission at Mercy Hill informs our Passions. Below is one Passion that flows out from this value.

1. Holistic Evangelism

If we are on God's Mission, as God's Ambassadors, compelled by a vision of both His holy wrath and free grace, it would be wise for us to give great consideration to what this might look like in our day to day lives. To get at this we want to identify a particular Passion that flows out of our value at this point: namely, Holistic Evangelism.

What Is *Evangelism*?

Let's begin to flesh this out by asking first: What is Evangelism?

Certainly, evangelism is fundamentally the proclamation of the evangel, the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. If we do not share this good news, this "message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19), we do not evangelize.

But this announcement of Christ's death and resurrection, is so much more than just a mere information dump. It is an invitation for our listeners to come back to the God who created them, to let Him put them back together, to let Him make them fully human again. In its fullest sense, *evangelization is rehumanization*. It's how the dead come back to life. Christianity is not drab and boring. It is not merely a set of rules or beliefs, it is a new way to be human. And by new, of course, we mean *old*. It's humanity according to ancient design. It's humanity as it was created to be.

As an illustration, we might consider a scene from C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia. Aslan has just risen from the dead and he's going through the courtyards and the dungeons of the White Witch's castle and breathing on all the creatures that she had turned to stone. And with the exhale of Aslan's breath, the stone starts to thaw, color starts to come back to the creatures, and they come alive again.

This is what Jesus does through the preaching of the gospel. He exhales His Spirit through the proclamation of His Ambassadors. He does this through you and through me, for people with hearts as cold as stone. Evangelization is rehumanization!

Christianity is not drab and boring. It is not merely a set of rules or beliefs, it is a new way to be human. And by new, of course, we mean old. It's humanity according to ancient design. It's humanity as it was created to be.

What Is *Holistic Evangelism*?

Now, why do we say we're passionate about *Holistic Evangelism*?

When we think of holistic medicine, we think of doctors who are willing to treat their patients as whole people. They aim for your health by approaching you not just physically, but psychologically, socially, etc. They engage all of you in their pursuit to help you.

Well, Holistic Evangelism can be understood along similar lines. Unfortunately, when most people think of evangelism they have this truncated, narrow view of it. Evangelism is memorizing a technique and passing out tracts. We have this sense that we're only doing evangelism if our hearts are racing, our palms are sweating, and we're about to go approach a stranger to share four spiritual laws or whatever.

While evangelism certainly should involve this kind of direct approach, this is not all that evangelism is. It is not something you do for an hour here or there as the Lord leads (or your church compels you). Evangelism in a broader sense should be happening all the time. It's a lifestyle—something you're doing in the everyday stuff of life. Holistic Evangelism means we are living out our full humanity before the world and inviting them into it through Christ.

Evangelism in a broader sense should be happening all the time. It's a lifestyle—something you're doing in the everyday stuff of life. Holistic Evangelism means we are living out our full humanity before the world and inviting them into it through Christ.

As it turns out, our categories of Faith, Community, and Mission actually serve us well here again. For if God created not just the church, but all of humanity, every person you meet, to exist in His Presence, as His People, with His Purpose, then it is right for us to consider even unbelievers along the lines of Faith, Community, and Mission. They too were created for intimate relationship with God (Faith), for loving relationship with others (Community), and for meaningful relationship with the world (Mission). They might no longer have these things, they might be settling for cheap counterfeits of these things, but there's still a residual memory and longing for these things. They've been created in His image, and though the image is marred, it's still there.

When we come and live out our Faith, Community, and Mission before them, it's as if we are breathing on their stony hearts, blowing on the embers of the image of God in them—fanning into flame a desire for the full humanity that is available to them in Christ.

So where a doctor practicing holistic medicine might approach a person along the lines of the physical, mental, and social, a Christian practicing Holistic Evangelism might approach a person along the lines of Faith, Community, and Mission. Let's consider each one briefly now.

1. Faith

Consider evangelism along the line of Faith—people have been created for intimate relationship with God.

Certainly this would include what we usually think of when we think of evangelism. We talk to people about their relationship with God. We knock on doors, we give away gospel tracts, we share with family members over the phone, we call people to repentance and faith. We just go for it!

But this also involves living out our relationship with God before others so that they can see what it looks like. We aren't censoring ourselves. Christians often speak two dialects—one when we're in the church, and one when we're in the world.

- When in the *church*: "How are you doing?" "I'm blessed. God is good. Let me tell you how He's been ministering to me lately."

- When in the *world*: “How are you doing?” “I’m good. I’m enjoying this fall weather. The Warriors’ season is about to start. Things are great.”

Now why do we do that? Why do we censor like this? The world needs to see our relationship with God, the relationship with God they too were created to have. They may laugh at us, they may say we’re weird. But we believe that, in those moments, we just might be breathing on stone, blowing on the embers of God’s image in them, fanning into flame a desire to be truly human again.

And as they awaken to relationship with God they find themselves brought into our Community and set with us on our Mission!

We want more of this in our church! Let’s keep dreaming about how we can evangelize the world along the line of Faith.

2. Community

Consider evangelism along the line of Community—people have been created for loving relationships with one another.

We can get to the message of reconciliation in the way we relate to people. In a world that’s forgotten them, that treats them like cogs in a machine, like objects to manipulate, we come in and give them our attention, our time, our care. We look them in the eyes. We listen to their stories. We laugh with them. We weep with them. We love them like Christ has loved us. We treat them like human beings. And in so doing we breathe on the stone, we blow on the embers, we fan the flame!

Consider this example:

Every summer, Dr. Jack Miller at Westminster Theological Seminary takes a large group of students and church members with him for three weeks of street preaching in Dublin, Ireland. They are on the streets almost all day long, witnessing, sharing . . . the gospel. Everyone they speak with is invited to a common meal held in the evening at a nearby church. The meal is quite simple. There are singing, some testimonies, and prayer. Here the unchurched, the curious, the converts, are given a taste of *koinonia* [fellowship]. One student said to me after that trip, “I think the most effective part of our ministry is carried on at the meal table. The guests see the church suddenly as a caring, sharing fellowship; their bargain with God is sealed by a cup of coffee.”¹

No longer are we just telling people the gospel, we are showing it to them. The way we love them, leads them to the love of God. Community leads back to Faith and brings them into the Mission.

We want more of this in our church! Let’s keep dreaming about how we can evangelize the world along the line of Community.

3. Mission

Consider evangelism along the line of Mission—people have been created for meaningful relationship with the world.

Unbelievers want the world and all that they are doing to have meaning and purpose. They want to be a part of something big. But they rob themselves of this when they go into business for themselves. In our efforts to get big, everything gets small.

¹ Harvie Conn, *Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1982), 37.

Then along comes the church. We have been put on the greatest mission in the universe. And we bring our new humanity into our workplaces, into our classrooms, into our neighborhoods, into our family rooms. We live out a different narrative—one that is written not by the world, the flesh, and the devil but by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in us. And it's compelling!

We don't work, parent, play, rest, suffer, or even eat and drink like the world. It's all done differently. It all has a richer meaning and greater purpose.

- When the unbeliever eats and drinks he does it with his belly, his appetites, in view (Phil 3:19). When a believer eats and drinks He does it with thanksgiving to his God (1 Tim 4:4). There are dimensions to our enjoyment of a good steak that the unbeliever knows nothing about. "My God created this and gave it to me. Thanks you!" And that's alluring to those looking on. We're breathing on stone.
- Or consider what Paul says about our suffering: "[We do] not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13). When we suffer, we handle it differently because the mission isn't about us. It's bigger than us. And we have a God who says: "Hold on, I'm doing something here." We suffer with hope. And that's alluring to those looking on. We're blowing on embers.
- Or when we work, Paul says we are to "adorn" the gospel (Titus 2:10). We work with integrity and for the good of others. We have a greater purpose than just getting a paycheck or making ourselves look great. We want to make our God look great and show Him off. And we labor out of love for Him. We're not owned by our job. We're free. And that's alluring to those looking on. We're fanning the flame.

And as people see how we relate to the world with this greater Mission, they just might see the God that stands with us in it and be brought to Faith and into our Community.

We want more of this in our church! Let's keep dreaming about how we can evangelize the world along the line of Mission.

O brothers and sisters, we hope you catch a passion for Holistic Evangelism. Evangelism isn't merely something you put on your calendar and do for an hour here or there. It's a lifestyle—it's being fully human in Christ and calling others into the same!

An Open Letter to My Sons

I almost designed this message as an open letter to my elder sons. Karsten has been married for three months and lives with Shelly in Boston and Benjamin just turned 20 and lives in Georgia and goes to a technical school while working as an apprentice in a German plastics company. Both of them are on their own and earning a living. Which raises this question: are they tithing the money they earn? Or was that a mere lifestyle option mom and dad chose—like, say, living in the city and shopping at Savers? One of my deep desires for my sons is that they handle their money in a God-exalting, biblical way. You'll see why this matters so much to me as their father before we're done.

Last year *Christianity Today* carried an article about young adults and financial giving. Here are several sentences that make me concerned about biblical finances for the wider Christian church. James Williams of the Church of God World Service said, "Our people 45 years old and younger have grown up mesmerized by materialism. There's tremendous pressure on families to spend, spend, and spend." Then he adds, "I've heard that the generation that believed in the tradition of tithing is in three places: retirement homes, nursing homes, or cemeteries."

In other words most baby boomers and baby busters haven't embraced tithing.

I have written to my sons brief admonitions and encouragements over the years. While they were at home, we taught them to take a tenth of everything they earned and give it to the cause of Christ. But they are gone now, and yet hundreds like them come to Bethlehem year after year. Maybe you are here in the Cities going to college. Or you are young and newly employed. You may be married and just starting a home of your own. And the question for you, as for my sons, is: how will you handle the money you earn?

A couple of weeks ago Ben and I talked on the phone about this issue. He had brought it up. And it was clear that one of the hindrances to tithing when you move is that the church you are used to giving to is back home and there is no place yet that feels home enough to invest all that money in. Be careful, lest that struggle become a drawn out pattern of non-giving. There is always a worthy church or ministry or mission to give to.

So, as a kind of open letter to my sons, and yet for all of you too, I want to appeal to you to tithe and go beyond the tithe in the way you release money out of your hands into the cause of Christ and his kingdom. I have called this message "*Toward the Tithe and Beyond*" because I know that many of you are not there yet and may be moving "toward" the practice of giving 10% of your gross income to the work of Christ. I have called it "*Toward the Tithe and Beyond*" because in a crying world like ours the more you make, the less ideal becomes the principle of 10%. I'll come back to that in a few minutes.

Seven Biblical Reasons to Tithe

The way I would like to handle this is to give seven summary reasons—which I will try to show from Scripture—for why I pray my sons will all give the first 10% of their income to the work of Christ, and then grow beyond that as God prospers them.

1. Honoring an Old Testament Principle

Tithing honors an Old Testament principle of how God provided for the ministers he called and the expenses of their ministry.

You recall that in the Old Testament God designated one of the twelve tribes of Israel, the tribe of Levi, to be the tribe that would have the ministry of the tabernacle and the temple. So instead of giving them a portion of the land, God said that these vocational ministers of the tabernacle should live off the tithes of the other eleven tribes. In Numbers 18:20–21 God said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor own any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the sons of Israel. And to the sons of Levi, behold, *I have given all the tithe in Israel for an inheritance*, in return for their service which they perform, the service of the tent of meeting.”

When we tithe today, we honor a principle found here. Some of God's people are called not to do moneymaking business in the ordinary ways. They are called to be pastors and ministers and missionaries and ministry assistants, and so on. The rest of God's people (call them "lay ministers") are to be gainfully employed and support the "vocational ministers"—and the costs of that ministry. In the Old Testament God laid down that this be done by tithe.

If the question is raised whether Jesus, in the New Testament, continued this principle for the sake of his church, one of the strongest arguments that he did is Matthew 23:23 where he says: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but *these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.*”

So Jesus endorses tithing: don't neglect it. It is *not* as essential as justice love and mercy; but it is to be done.

Yet one might say that he is only talking to Jews in an essentially Old Testament setting. Maybe so. But there is another pointer that the principle was preserved in the early church. In 1 Corinthians 9:13–14 Paul says: “Do you not know that those who perform sacred services [in the temple] eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar [of sacrifice in the temple] have their share with the altar?”

In other words he reminds the church that in the Old Testament economy there was this system in which the Levites who worked in the temple lived off the tithes brought to the temple. Then he says in verse 14: “So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.”

The least Paul is saying is that those who spend their lives in the service of the Word of God should be supported by the rest of the Christians. But since he draws attention to the way it was done in the Old Testament as the model, it seems likely that tithing would have been the early Christian guideline, if not mandate.

In other words when we tithe today, we honor a principle and plan of God that sustained the ministry in the Old Testament and probably sustained the New Testament ministry as well.

2. Honoring the Creator as Owner of All

When we release a tenth of our income and give it over to the ministry and mission of Christ in the world, we honor the Creator rights of God who owns everything, including all our income.

One objection to thinking of a tenth of our income as especially belonging to God is that ALL our money belongs to God. Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it.”

That is absolutely true. It's why my main way of talking about money year in and year out at Bethlehem is not to focus on tithing, but to focus on lifestyle. What you do with every cent says something about your view of God and what he means to you. And what your values are in this age. And what you think your few years on earth should be spent for. That's true.

But God is wise and knows us deeply. He knows that there is something wrong with the husband who answers his wife's complaint that he doesn't give her any time by saying, "What do you mean, I don't give you my time? ALL my time is yours. I work all day long for you and the children." That has a very hollow ring to it if he doesn't give her any "especially time." Giving her some evenings together and some dates does not deny that all his time is for her, it proves it. This is why God declares one day in seven especially God's. They are all his, and making one special proves it.

And this is the way it is with our money and God. Giving God a tenth of our income does not deny that all our money is God's, it proves that we believe it. Tithing is like a constant offering of the first fruits of the whole thing. The tenth is yours, O, Lord, in a *special* way, because all of it is yours in an *ordinary* way.

I believe the tithe should be the first check we write after the income deposit is made in the bank. And when you write it, you put a seal over what's left: GOD'S. The tithe reminds us of that, and proves that we really believe it.

3. The Antidote to Covetousness

Giving away a tenth of our income to the mission and ministry of Christ is an antidote to covetousness. The last of the Ten Commandments says: "Thou shalt not covet." Jesus said in Luke 12:15: "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of covetousness [or greed]." And in Colossians 3:5 Paul calls covetousness "idolatry."

Wanting things too much is incredibly dangerous for your soul. Hebrews 13:5 says: "Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have."

Every time you give a tithe, you must deal with the desire for what you might have bought for yourself. To give is not to buy. And that weekly crisis is utterly important to maintain. We must fight covetousness almost every day. And God has appointed an antidote: giving. He tests us again and again: what do we desire most—the advancement of his name or 10% more security and comfort and fun? As Jesus says, You know where your heart is by where your treasure is. Tithing is one of God's great antidotes to covetousness.

4. Governing Ever-Expanding Spending

The fourth reason is almost the same as the last one, but not quite. When we go to the tithe *and beyond*, as I am suggesting we should, it puts a governor on ever-expanding spending.

There is an almost infallible human rule: spending expands to fill the income. This is why you could have a book a few years ago entitled *Getting By on \$100,000 a Year*. If you make more, you buy more, and the things you buy have to be stored and repaired and insured. Spending begets spending. If you have less at your disposal, you spend less. And most of the time you don't even think about it. I spend absolutely no time thinking about world cruises and \$30,000 cars. But if I made two or three hundred thousand dollars a year, pretty soon things like that wouldn't seem any more strange to me than all the stuff I buy now—because I could afford it.

If this is true—if expenses almost inevitably expand to fill the income—how shall we restrain ourselves from accumulating more and more stuff and more and more expensive stuff, and looking to the world like we have all the same values they do in our little earthly prelude to eternity? The answer is that as our income grows, we move beyond the tithe. We resolve to give a greater and greater percentage of our income to advance the kingdom. This puts the brakes on our natural impulse toward luxury.

Illustration: John Wesley

Take John Wesley for example. He was one of the great evangelists of the 18th Century, born in 1703. In 1731 he began to limit his expenses so that he would have more money to give to the poor. In the first year his income was 30 pounds and he found he could live on 28 and so gave away two. In the second year his income doubled but he held his expenses even, and so he had 32 pounds to give away (a comfortable year's income). In the third year his income jumped to 90 pounds and he gave away 62 pounds. In his long life Wesley's income advanced to as high as 1,400 pounds in a year. But he rarely let his expenses rise above 30 pounds. He said that he seldom had more than 100 pounds in his possession at a time.

This so baffled the English Tax Commissioners that they investigated him in 1776 insisting that for a man of his income he must have silver dishes that he was not paying excise tax on. He wrote them, "I have two silver spoons at London and two at Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present, and I shall not buy any more while so many round me want bread."

When he died in 1791 at the age of 87, the only money mentioned in his will was the coins to be found in his pockets and dresser. Most of the 30,000 pounds he had earned in his life had been given away. He wrote, I cannot help leaving my books behind me whenever God calls me hence; but in every other respect, my own hands will be my executors.

In other words, I will put a control on my spending myself, and I will go beyond the tithe for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.¹

The last three reasons for moving to the tithe and beyond are all found in one text, 2 Corinthians 9:6–8. Let's read it and then point out the reasons briefly. Paul is talking about giving.

Now this I say, he who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully. Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.

5. God's Way of Bringing About Good Deeds

The fifth reason for going to the tithe and beyond in our giving is that this is God's way of bringing about many good deeds for his glory.

At the end of verse 8 Paul says that when you sow bountifully and cheerfully, you will "have an abundance for every good deed." The goal is good deeds. Excess money is for good deeds. These are the things that make your light shine and cause people to give glory to your Father in heaven. If you lay up treasures on earth, people have no reason to think your Father in heaven is glorious. You look like you love what everyone else loves. According to Titus 2:13 Christ died "to purify for himself a people who are zealous for good deeds." 2 Corinthians 9:8 says that the aim of material bounty is "for every good deed." Verse 11 says, "You will be enriched in everything *for all liberality*." Excess money is given to us so we can show where our treasure is by giving it away.

So the fifth reason for going to the tithe and bountifully beyond is that this is God's way of providing for many good deeds.

6. God's Way of Providing for You

The sixth reason for pressing to the tithe and beyond is that it is God's way of providing you, the tither, sufficient money for your needs.

¹ Quotes from *Mission Frontiers*, Sept./Oct. 1994, nos. 9–10, pp. 23–24.

Giving is a way of having what you need. Giving in a regular, disciplined, generous way—up to and beyond the tithe—is simply good sense in view of the promises of God. Verse 6 says: "He who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully." Then verse 8 says: "God is able to make all grace abound to you that always having all sufficiency . . . " In other words the "bountiful reaping" promised in verse 6 is explained in verse 8 by God's pledge to give a sufficiency for us and an abundance for good deeds.

This seems to be Paul's way of expressing Malachi 3:10: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows."

This is an amazing challenge from God. Test me, he says. You think you can't afford to tithe? Well test me. And what we will find when we test him is that we cannot afford *not* to tithe—and beyond! This is the only safe way to handle our money. Jesus once said, in Luke 6:38: "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap."

This is not a guarantee of getting rich. It's a guarantee of "an abundance for every good work" and sufficiency for yourself.

7. Proving and Strengthening Our Faith

Finally, in our giving we should press toward the tithe and beyond because it will prove and strengthen our faith in God promises.

There is an absolute correlation between faith in the promises of God and peace of mind in giving away what we may think we need but don't. Hebrews 13:5 puts it like this: "Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; [why? because of a promise] for He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.'"

Every time you doubt that you can live on 90% of your income, let the glorious promise of God strengthen your faith: "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

So you can see why I care so much about my sons and whether they are remembering the rock from which they were hewn. Because what tithing boils down to is a faith issue. Do we trust God's promises? I appeal to you, my sons. I appeal to you, my people. Trust God. He will never fail or forsake you. He will supply all your needs.