

Bible Commentary on Philemon

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Bible Commentary on Philemon

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First Edition on 6/30/2019

Second Edition on 11/8/2022

Third Edition on 11/8/2022

The dates before each chapter reflect the date it was written, and the dates it was edited or expanded.

Introduction

This is not your typical commentary, so I'd like to give a few words of explanation before you begin. As a child I was taught to read the Word of God on a daily basis. Our goal as a family was to read through the Bible once a year, and that is what we did. When I became an adult I kept reading the Bible from cover to cover.

One day, however, I realized that I wanted something more. Reading the Bible was good, but I wanted to actually *study* it. Could I explain what each verse meant? Did I really understand what each chapter was saying? I decided to start writing daily commentary instead of just reading the Word.

This commentary was put together to help me study the Bible. I have no plans to release it, for there are far better commentaries out there that were written by much wiser men. This document is simply a tool to help me understand what the Word of God has to say.

Jon Cooper
4/14/2019

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4/8/2022

Introduction to Philemon

Scholars believe that the book of Philemon was written around 62 AD (see Resource 2, "Timeline"). This means Paul wrote it about 32 years after the resurrection, and 28 years after the apostle encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. It was the 10th book that Paul wrote and the 12th book of the New Testament to come into existence.

2/18/2011, 9/12/2018, 6/30/2019, 7/29/2022

Philemon 1

This brief letter tells an interesting story. Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves who escaped and somehow met Paul. While he was in Paul's care he was saved. After this happened Paul sent him back to Philemon with this very kind, loving, and supportive letter that was clearly designed to repair the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon and ensure that Onesimus was welcomed back – and then returned to Paul as a free man.

Before we get into this letter we need a little bit of background. The book of Philemon was written during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, which occurred in 62 AD. While Paul was in prison he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Most of Paul's letters were written to churches in order to address various problems that they were facing. This particular letter is different: it was written to a family in order to address the issue of their runaway slave. Paul wrote this letter with one clear goal in mind: setting Onesimus free. What is fascinating is the way Paul went about accomplishing that goal.

Slavery in the Roman Empire was a very serious matter. It

is estimated that around one third of Italy's entire population was slaves. Slaves were considered to be property, and masters had the right to put them to death for very small offenses. Rome was in constant fear of slave revolts and experienced three significant rebellions in its history. This fear led them to treat runaway slaves very harshly. The laws regarding runaway slaves were very strict: if you found one you were required to turn him in so he could be returned to his master – where he stood a good chance of being crucified and killed.

When Paul met Onesimus he was under a legal obligation to turn him in to the authorities. However, Paul did not do that. Instead he took a different approach – and that is what we are going to investigate.

It seems that when Paul met Onesimus the first thing he did was share the gospel with him. Under Paul's care and teaching Onesimus came to know the Lord. Once Onesimus was a Christian Paul wrote a very interesting letter to his master Philemon – and that is the letter we are going to study.

There were a lot of different ways Paul could have handled this situation. Paul was an apostle, after all; he had a lot of influence in the churches, he was well-known, and he was highly respected. Paul could have addressed Philemon with great force – but he didn't. Instead he took a very different approach. Paul once told Timothy to be careful when dealing with other believers:

1 Timothy 5:1: "Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren;"

Paul said that Christians ought to treat older men with respect and younger men as brothers. Paul urged Timothy to be gentle and courteous, instead of going into the situation and using force to deal with it. In the letter to Philemon we will see

this principle in action. There are a lot of things Paul could have said, but he chose to be very gentle – and yet Paul still put an incredible amount of pressure on Philemon.

Look at how Paul opened the letter:

"1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer," (Philemon 1)

In most of Paul's letters he always started by identifying himself as an apostle. He used his apostolic position to establish his authority and make it clear that the recipient of the letter should listen to him. In this letter to Philemon, however, Paul doesn't do that. He *could* have said "Hey Philemon! It's me, Paul the apostle. You have to do whatever I tell you because *I'm an apostle*." But Paul doesn't do that. Paul didn't use his authority to force Philemon to do anything. Instead he worked on Philemon's *emotions*. He didn't call himself Paul the apostle; instead he called himself Paul the *prisoner*. He painted a picture of himself as a prisoner who was locked away in Rome and suffering on behalf of the gospel.

After Paul established himself as a suffering prisoner, he highly praised Philemon. He described him as someone who was "dearly beloved". Philemon was a "fellowlaborer". That is high praise! How would you like it if Paul called *you* a fellow-laborer in Christ?

Paul didn't stop at greeting Philemon. He also greeted the rest of his family:

"2 And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: 3 Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Philemon 1)

Apphia was probably Philemon's wife. This is significant because in Roman times the wife was the one who had authority over the slaves. Since Paul was writing about an escaped slave, this was something that directly affected her. Archippus was probably Philemon's son.

Verse 2 tells us that there was a church in Philemon's house, which is not surprising. In those days Christians did not meet in church buildings the way we do today; instead they met in the homes of believers. Philemon had a church that met in his house, but although Paul mentions it he doesn't address this letter to it because he was writing about a private family matter – the escaped slave Onesimus. (For more information on this topic see Appendix 6, "Unbiblical Church Practices", subsection "Church Buildings Are Unbiblical".)

Paul was still not done with the introduction of his letter. He went on to say that he was praying for Philemon, even though Paul was in prison (and therefore Philemon really should be praying for him):

"4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers," (Philemon 1)

He also praised Philemon's faith and love:

"5 Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; 6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus."
(Philemon 1)

In this passage Paul says that Philemon had a lot of love and faith for *all* saints. This is important! Philemon doesn't know it yet but his slave Onesimus is now a Christian, which means he

is part of "all saints". As we will see, Paul will make the case that since Philemon has great love for the saints of God, this means he should also have great love for Onesimus as well.

Paul then praised Philemon's hospitality:

"7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother." (Philemon 1)

Paul has spent almost a third of this letter just greeting Philemon, but there is a strategic purpose behind this. Paul was thanking Philemon for several very specific things: for being loving and kind, for being good to the saints, and for being very hospitable. Paul is going to take advantage of those traits and tell Philemon that he should apply them to his runaway slave Onesimus. Paul wants Philemon to show Onesimus that same love, kindness, and hospitality. After this gracious introduction it's going to be very hard for Philemon to refuse Paul.

Once the introduction has been concluded the apostle gets to the heart of the issue. He first makes it clear that Paul does indeed have apostolic authority. Paul could have come down hard on Philemon, but instead he chose to entreat him as a brother:

"8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, 9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ." (Philemon 1)

Paul reminded Philemon that he was a prisoner in Rome, and on top of that he was an old man. Philemon wouldn't refuse the request of a suffering prisoner, would he? Surely Philemon wouldn't say no to an old man who was suffering in prison for

the cause of Christ. After all, Philemon was a loving and hospitable person, and no loving person would ever dare to do something that heartless.

Do you see what's going on? When Philemon read this letter he couldn't possibly have missed the point. Paul was making it very hard for Philemon to refuse what he was about to ask – and he's barely gotten started. Paul went on to describe Onesimus as his own son:

"10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:" (Philemon 1)

Philemon would probably have had some rather bad memories of Onesimus, the slave who ran away from him. But now Philemon would find it difficult to be hard on Onesimus. After all, Paul the apostle – the man who wrote a large portion of the New Testament, and whom God used to do mighty miracles – just called Onesimus *his son*. Paul was clearly very attached to him! Onesimus wasn't a simple runaway slave anymore. Now he was a favorite of one of the most prominent leaders of the early church, which created a whole different situation. If Philemon did anything to harm him then Paul was going to find out about it, and I'm sure Philemon didn't want Paul coming after him. (Would you?)

Paul then referred to Onesimus' past, but he does so in a rather interesting way:

"11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:" (Philemon 1)

What we miss in the English translation is the fact that the name Onesimus actually means *profitable*. Paul was making a play on Onesimus' name. In the past he was *unprofitable*, but

now things have changed. Onesimus wasn't a runaway slave anymore. He was now a fellow saint who was profitable to Philemon *and* to Paul. Therefore, Paul wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus with great kindness:

"12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:"
(Philemon 1)

The King James Version has a very literal way of translating this verse. In ancient times the bowels were believed to be the seat of human emotions. Today we would use the word "heart" instead. Paul was basically telling Philemon that he loved Onesimus like a son and Philemon should treat him with great care. Paul didn't want Philemon to crucify Onesimus or have him torn apart by lions.

Yes, Paul does send Onesimus back to Philemon, but he didn't turn Onesimus over to the authorities. He also didn't send Onesimus back alone. The journey back to Philemon would have been long and hazardous, and Onesimus could have easily ended up arrested. Therefore Paul sent him back in the company of someone else. Although the letter to Philemon doesn't discuss the travel arrangements, we can find them in Paul's letter to Colossians:

Colossians 4:7: "All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord:
... 9 With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here."

Onesimus was indeed going back, but Tychicus was going with him to see what happened.

Interestingly, Paul made it clear that he actually wanted Onesimus to stay with him:

"13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: 14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly."
(Philemon 1)

Once again we see Paul mentioning the fact that he was a prisoner for the sake of Christ. The apostle told Philemon that he was suffering in prison and *really* needed some help so he could continue to spread the gospel. In fact, what he actually needed was the help of Onesimus, but Paul didn't want to use his authority to just take Onesimus by force. He wanted Philemon to willingly let Onesimus go.

That was going to be a very difficult request for Philemon to refuse, wasn't it? Paul just praised Philemon for being a great guy who was devoted to the cause of Christ. The apostle Paul happened to have a need that was directly tied to the gospel, and it was a need that Philemon could meet. How could Philemon refuse him? Only a monster would say "Yes, Paul, I know you're in prison and I know you need my help, but I just don't care." Remember, Philemon actually had a church *in his house*. If he turned Paul down then his congregation was definitely going to hear about it. How could Philemon explain to his church that he refused to help a suffering apostle who was in prison?

Paul wanted Philemon to set Onesimus free, and he wanted Philemon to do it willingly. The apostle was putting a *lot* of pressure on Philemon to let Onesimus go. But Paul wasn't done yet. He next tried to change Philemon's attitude toward Onesimus:

"15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;
16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?" (Philemon 1)

Paul told Philemon that perhaps it was God's will for Onesimus to run away so he could be converted and become a Christian. Yes, he did indeed run away, but in the end it was a blessing. God used the situation to save his soul from Hell and transform his life. Paul wanted Philemon to actually *rejoice* that Onesimus left him! The apostle was working to change Philemon's attitude about the situation. Onesimus was no longer a mere slave; instead Philemon should see him as a *beloved brother*. Since Philemon loved the saints he ought to love Onesimus as well. In fact, Philemon should rejoice over this because it brought someone to Christ.

As you can see, Paul is working hard on Onesimus' behalf and was seeking to change Philemon's attitude. Runaway slaves were typically greeted with torture and death. Paul, however, wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he was Paul himself:

"17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself." (Philemon 1)

"Do you consider me to be a partner in the gospel, Philemon?" What a question to ask! Paul was *much more* than just a partner; why, Paul had done more to spread the gospel than Philemon could ever hope to match. Philemon was not worthy to be compared with Paul, and yet Paul was making that comparison. Paul was saying that if Philemon considered him, Paul the apostle, to be a fellow laborer in the gospel, then

Philemon should treat Onesimus the same way he would treat Paul himself. Philemon should not beat Onesimus and kill him; instead he should welcome him back with love and grace.

But Paul was still not done. It seems that Onesimus did more than just run away from his master; he apparently wronged Philemon in other ways as well. Whatever he did, Paul said to put it on his account:

"18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; 19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides." (Philemon 1)

Now Philemon couldn't prosecute Onesimus for anything because Paul said he would repay it personally. Did Onesimus steal anything? Did he wrong anyone? Then send the bill to Paul. The apostle would cover Onesimus' debt.

Since Paul wrote this, there was no way for Philemon to prosecute his runaway slave without looking like a complete jerk. Philemon couldn't just ignore the apostle, but at the same time imagine how awkward it would have been for Philemon to try to send Paul a bill! There was Paul, in prison, suffering for the gospel. Only a callous monster would say "Yes, Paul, I know you're in jail and everything, but here's the bill that you owe. Please take the donations that the churches are giving you to in order to keep you alive, and send them to me. Thanks." Although Philemon *could* do that, and I have no doubt that Paul was serious about paying Onesimus' debt, you would have to have a heart of stone to write that sort of bill.

Just in case Philemon was unhappy about this turn of events, Paul reminded him (in a rather clever way) that Philemon owed *him* a great debt. It seemed that Philemon came to know Christ through the ministry of Paul. Paul was saying "Yes, it's true

that Onesimus owes you a debt. But don't forget that you owe *me* a debt as well, and I have never tried to collect on it."

The parallels between what Paul did for Onesimus and what Christ did for us are very clear, and I'm sure Philemon could not have missed them. Paul was taking upon himself the wrong that Onesimus did and was offering to pay for it. Christ took upon Himself the wrongs that we did and paid for them on the cross. Paul was reminding Philemon that just as he was forgiven, he should also forgive those who wronged him.

Paul *still* wasn't done. He goes on:

"20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord." (Philemon 1)

Paul, the aged apostle, was suffering in prison for the cause of Christ. He needed Philemon's help. Surely Philemon was going to help him, right? Surely Philemon was going to give Paul a bit of joy in the dark prison where he was languishing. Surely Philemon wasn't going to make things worse and bring him pain.

That is what Paul is saying here. It's true that he wasn't giving Philemon orders, but there was no way Philemon could have missed Paul's meaning. Paul wanted Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, to forgive him, to treat him as a brother in Christ, and then to send him back to Paul. In fact, Paul tells Philemon that he was confident Philemon would do more than he asked:

"21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say." (Philemon 1)

It would have been *enormously* difficult for Philemon to refuse Paul's request. After everything Paul wrote it would have been very awkward for Philemon to write back and say "Paul, I

know you have confidence in me. I know you said you would pay his debt and I know I owe you my life, but your confidence in me is misplaced. I'm not going to listen to you." Paul has been very gentle about it, but he maneuvered Philemon into a corner.

I don't know what sort of person Philemon was; the Bible doesn't mention him anywhere else or record how this story turned out. But if Paul was confident that Philemon would do more than Paul asked then he was probably right. Even so, Paul still added some extra insurance to his letter:

"22 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. 23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; 24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. 25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen." (Philemon 1)

Although Paul was writing to Philemon directly, it seems that quite a few other people were aware of what was going on. This wasn't just a private matter anymore! Whatever Philemon did, the rest of the church would hear about. The word had spread and that put even more pressure on Philemon.

On top of that, Paul was essentially telling Philemon that one day he would get out of prison (which did happen), and when that occurred he was going to go visit Philemon. When Paul visited Philemon he was going to find out how he treated Onesimus. This could be interpreted as a subtle warning: one way or another Paul would find out what happened and would hold Philemon accountable.

Interestingly, Ignatius wrote in 110 AD that the bishop of Ephesus was a person named Onesimus. No one knows if it was the same Onesimus that is mentioned in this letter, but it's possible. If he was just a teenager when he was Philemon's slave

then he could have lived long enough to be that same person. It would be nice to think that Philemon did everything Paul asked and Onesimus later became one of the leaders of the church.

This letter is primarily focused on Paul's dealings with Philemon, but there is another factor to consider. As we know, this letter was included in the canon of the New Testament. This means that this letter must have been passed around to the other churches back in the time when it was written. Philemon was not the only person who read it; other slaveholders probably did as well.

When they read this letter, what would they have learned from it? Well, it was obvious that Paul wanted the gospel to be preached to everyone – even to slaves. Paul wanted converts to Christ to come from every walk in life. But there's more to it than that: Paul showed tremendous love and kindness to Onesimus. He ignored Roman law and treated him as a brother and not as property. He wanted Onesimus to be loved as a fellow saint, and he wanted Onesimus to be set free so he could serve the Lord and advance the gospel.

Yes, slaveholders could just ignore this letter and do as they pleased – just as people ignore the Bible all the time and live as they see fit. But no honest man could miss the plain desire of the apostles. Paul was being very gentle here, but he was absolutely crystal clear about what he wanted to see done. He did not treat Onesimus as a slave; instead he treated him as his own son – and he wanted to see him set free.

One final note. This mention of Demas was made in 62 AD during Paul's first imprisonment. By the time Paul writes the book of 2 Timothy in 67 AD, Demas will have forsaken him.

Appendix 6: Unbiblical Church Practices

If you take a look at the many different denominations that exist today, you will find some pretty significant differences when it comes to the doctrines that they teach. However, one thing they all seem to have in common is the way they do church. There seems to be almost universal agreement that there's only one way to have a church service. It's true there are some differences from one church to another, but those differences are largely superficial. This is very unfortunate, because I think the way we've decided to "do church" is very unbiblical. Not only is it unbiblical, but it might be one of the worst possible ways that a church service could be conducted.

What I'd like to do is take a closer look at our church services and the many problems associated with them. I want to explore what the Bible actually has to say about "doing church" – and how completely different its teachings are from the way we do things. There's an enormous gap between the Biblical church and what we have today, and it doesn't seem like very many people have noticed.

Nearly all churches hold their primary (and most important) service on Sunday morning. People from all over the city drive to a building that's universally called "the church". They typically show up a few minutes before the service starts and take their seat. An usher at the door hands them a bulletin, which tells them exactly what's going to happen during the service. The reason the bulletin is so detailed is because the church staff has spent the entire week planning this service. They know exactly what songs are going to be sung, what prayers will be made, what the sermon is going to be about, and how long the service will last (usually within a few minutes).

The service starts out with singing, which is led by the song leader. (In many churches this is a full-time paid position.) At some point the announcements are made and the offering is collected. Someone reads some Scripture, someone leads the congregation in prayer, and then the pastor starts his sermon. He's been working on it all week so he knows exactly what he's going to say. Usually he's prepared a PowerPoint presentation to go along with it. Once his sermon is over it's pretty common to have an "altar call", where people are asked to go to the front of the church and pray what's called "the sinner's prayer". As soon as the service is over the congregation immediately goes home.

There may be some differences from church to church, but that's very close to how all mainline Protestant churches handle their services. It doesn't matter what your denomination is: the service is going to be handled more or less the same way. Some churches may have responsive readings while others don't, but the differences are minor. No one questions the way churches do things. This is the way things have always been done, and it's widely accepted – but I don't think it's right.

If you go to church on Sunday morning, are you going to have any opportunities to meaningfully interact with another human being? Probably not. After all, most people arrive shortly before the service starts and then go home the moment it ends. If you're lucky you might be able to have a short and fairly meaningless conversation with whoever is sitting behind you (probably along the lines of "Hello!"). However, you can go to church every Sunday morning for *years* and never learn anything significant about the people who have been sitting behind you. That's just how it is. If you want to get to know people you'll have to find some other way to do it, outside of the service. (Good luck with that. It won't be easy.)

Once the service starts, you're going to spend the entire time doing exactly what you're told. You will sing whatever songs you're told to sing, and pray whatever you're told to pray. You

will give when it's time to give. When the pastor starts his sermon you will listen to it quietly. The only time the congregation will speak is when the pastor tells them to repeat some phrase he has said, and then they will say exactly what the pastor told them to say. Your job in the service is to be completely passive. There's literally nothing for you to do but sit there until it's time to go home.

Is there something you wanted to sing? Sorry, the songs are all chosen in advance. You can always sing at home, in the shower. Do you have a prayer request? Sorry, there's no time for that in the Sunday morning service (or the Sunday evening service, if your church happens to have one of those). You'll have to pray at home. Are you struggling with something in your life? Sorry, the church service isn't the place to mention that. Do you have a question about the pastor's sermon? Sorry, you can't speak up and ask him – his sermon is timed, and he has to finish at a precise moment so everyone can go home. Did the pastor make a terrible mistake and say the wrong thing? Sorry, you can't correct him. You just have to let it go, even if it means people will be misled and go away believing the wrong thing. Does the pastor's sermon cover material you already know? Sorry about that. There's nothing you can do but sit there and hope that next week he has different material.

If you don't show up at church for a month, is that going to impact the service? Nope. You weren't allowed to contribute anything anyway (except for your money). The people who normally sit behind you might notice that your spot is empty, but your absence isn't going to change the service. If half the church stayed home (which is actually pretty normal), the service would still unfold exactly as planned. The same songs would be sung, the same prayers would be prayed, and the same sermon would be given. This is because the only people who are allowed to participate in the service is the church staff (who are often paid and in full-time positions). They pick all the songs, and all the

prayers, and the sermon topic. The reason you are coming is to watch a performance, not participate.

While you're there you're probably going to spend 30 minutes (or more) listening to a sermon. Was that sermon written with you in mind? Nope. Since the congregation has hundreds or even thousands of people in it, the pastor can't possibly write something that's directed at your needs. Instead he will pick a passage from the Bible and preach on it, and hope that somehow you will find something meaningful in it. Since he's preaching to a lot of people (many of whom may be Biblically illiterate), he can't go very deep. If you've been attending church for a while it's quite likely that you've either heard that message before or you're already familiar with the passage, which means the pastor may have nothing for you at all. Also, since the pastor knows that many of the people in his congregation might not be Christians, he's going to spend time explaining the gospel and asking people to come forward and "get saved". That's why some people try to sneak out at the end of the service – they don't want to hear the same altar call for the thousandth time.

Our church services are very strange. If you want to pray, you can do that – at home. If you want to sing, you can do that – at home. If you want to study the Bible and really dig into a passage, you can do that – at home. If you want to get to know people, you can do that – at home. If you're struggling with something, you can get help – by reaching out to someone *outside* of the service and making an appointment. (Some pastors charge for counseling, so keep that in mind.) If you have questions then you can always go home and try to look up the answers online.

Suppose that people *didn't* go to the church building on Sunday and instead remained at home and watched the service online. Would anything change? Well, from the *pastor's* perspective it would be terrible because his audience was gone.

It's very difficult to preach to an empty room! However, from the *congregation's* perspective it would largely be the same. It's true they would miss out on the 15 seconds they spend saying "Hello" to that person who has set behind them for the past five years, but other than that it's pretty much the same. They would still sing what they're told, pray whatever they're told, and listen to a sermon that wasn't written with them in mind. The congregation has no way of contributing if they show up, and they also have no way of contributing if they stay home.

Suppose that instead of watching a *live* sermon, they listen to a sermon that was recorded 10 years ago by someone a thousand miles away. Would anything change? Nope. They're still listening to a sermon that wasn't written with them in mind. They're still singing what they're told to sing and praying what they're told to pray. They're still not participating in any meaningful way. They're just passive participants, listening to a service that doesn't actually need them at all and which can go on just fine without them.

Many people never question this. After all, church services have always been this way! This is just how things are. However, the truth is that services have *not* always been this way. In fact, the services that we find in the New Testament are *completely different* from the way we do things today. Not only would the apostles not recognize our services, I suspect they would be very unhappy at what we've done. The modern church has picked what might be the worst possible way to "do church". Let's take a look at what the Bible has to say about the subject.

Church Buildings Are Unbiblical

Have you ever noticed that when people mention the building in which services are held, they always call it "the

church"? This is universal across all denominations. If you talk to pastors about this they will eventually say that the church is really the people, and the building is just a building. The problem is that no one seems to actually believe that. In *practice* the church really is the building. (I know that's hard to believe, but by the time we reach the end of this discussion I think you'll see what I mean. Actions speak louder than words.)

If a pastor has founded a church in a new city and is meeting in a location that's not a church building, he will earnestly desire a building of his own. He will ask his congregation to make painful financial sacrifices in order to raise the enormous amounts of money that are required to purchase a building. Once he has that building, he will want to renovate it and expand it. There is no point at which the building is considered to be "large enough": it can always be bigger and pack in more people. That's why there are church buildings that can seat thousands upon thousands of people, and which have restaurants and movie theaters and art galleries and gymnasiums. Pastors universally want to have the biggest building they possibly can. That's what they dream about. Preaching to ten thousand people every Sunday morning would be a dream come true.

Is that how things were done in the New Testament? Nope. The Bible never says that Christians should invest millions of dollars in buildings and then hold their church services there. In fact, there are no cases anywhere in the New Testament where anyone even *considered* doing such a thing! Instead churches met in people's homes:

1 Corinthians 16:19: "The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house."

Colossians 4:15: "Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house."

Philemon 1:2: "And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:"

But that was a foolish way of doing things, right? After all, the early church was poor and didn't have many options. They were also fiercely persecuted, so it would have been impossible for them to buy real-estate and construct a building! They did they best they could under the circumstances, but we live in different times. It is only right for Christians to build religious buildings wherever they can. That's how many people think – but does the Bible actually say that? The truth is, *it doesn't*.

If God wanted Christians to build church buildings He definitely could have told us. After all, in the Old Testament He commanded the Jews to build the temple. We tend to think that since God told the Jews to build the temple in the Old Testament, Christians should build religious buildings as well because God really likes buildings. The problem is there's no Scriptural support for that. God never said "Go into all the world and build million-dollar buildings". Instead the pattern we find in the New Testament is *people meeting in homes*. In fact, that's the *only* pattern we're given!

Church buildings are actually a terrible idea. First of all, church buildings make it impossible for the pastor to do his job. What do I mean by that? Well, I think that pastors would universally agree that they're shepherds, and their job is to take care of their sheep. It's pretty clear that shepherds should model themselves after the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. He had a lot to say about being a shepherd:

John 10:11-14: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine."

Jesus contrasted a good shepherd with a hireling. The good shepherd knows all of his sheep, and they know him. He cares for them and watches over them and protects them when they're in danger – even risking his own life when necessary. When one of his sheep gets in trouble, he immediately notices and goes after him:

Luke 15:4: "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost."

Suppose that your church is meeting in someone's house, and is composed of 15 people. Can the shepherd get to know everyone? Of course! In that sort of setting everyone could learn about everyone else, and form a very close bond. Would the shepherd notice if something happened to someone? Absolutely – it would be immediately obvious.

But that's not the way modern churches are, is it? If your

church has hundreds of members then it's possible the pastor may recognize you, but that's probably going to be the extent of your interaction with him. He's not going to know much about you at all, and if you're in trouble he's not going to be aware of it. If your church has thousands or tens of thousands of members then it's quite possible he will never notice you're there at all. In a case like that, if you get in trouble you'll need to fill out a form and file it with the right person and schedule an appointment to meet with a counselor, and possibly pay a counseling fee. That means if you're a lost sheep, you will have to rescue yourself. No one is going to come looking for you because the congregation is very large, and you are too small to notice.

But house churches wouldn't have that problem, would they? Since they're small they can form a community. Since they're small, everyone can get to know everyone else. Since they're small they can become involved in one another's lives. Since they're meeting in a house it's impossible for them to grow very large – there simply isn't enough space. That forces them to remain small, *which is a good thing*.

Here's another way to look at it. The world outside the church understands that small classroom sizes are much better and more desirable than large ones. If you're a student who's trying to learn something, it's much better to be in a classroom with 30 other students than a classroom with 3000 other students. Education can be improved by reducing the ratio of students to teachers and allowing each teacher more time to work with students individually. If you are one student in a classroom with thousands of other students, it's going to be almost impossible to get much of the teacher's time – which means you're largely on your own. Large classroom sizes are very bad for students – and yet *that's precisely how our churches are designed*.

Why are they designed that way? Because the truth is the building is more important than the people. We may never say

that out loud, but that's what our *actions* are saying. After all, we ask people to make great sacrifices in order to raise huge sums of money to pay for the building – and once they enter that building their reward is to be put into an enormous group and then sit passively until the service is over and they can go home. For many congregations the upkeep on the building itself is a crippling expense. People have to pay for the building itself, and pay to maintain the building, and pay to maintain the parking lot. If they're not paying off the mortgage then they're raising money to build a new building (because building projects never end). Millions and millions of dollars are spent building very elaborate and expensive buildings that do a very poor job of serving the people.

In the Sunday morning service that's held in these large and elaborate buildings, which is the only service that most people attend, can people make prayer requests? Nope – you must do that elsewhere. Can they ask questions during the pastor's sermon? Nope – it doesn't work that way. If they want to pray or sing or study or get to know people or build relationships, they have to do it *outside the building*. The building doesn't seem to be there to serve them; instead they are there to serve the building. They would actually be much better off without it! Not only would it save them an enormous expense (which would free up money for things like missions), but it would force them to meet in small groups in people's homes.

No, I'm not suggesting that we take the Sunday morning experience and transplant that into people's homes. The building is only part of the problem. We also need to take a closer look at what we're actually doing in our services, which is what we'll discuss next.

Modern Church Services Are Unbiblical

The early church did *not* conduct services the way that we do today. They had a very different approach:

1 Corinthians 14:26-33: "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God. Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints."

When the early church came together, everyone had a psalm to sing or something they wanted to say. Did Paul rebuke this? Nope. Instead he told them to conduct their services in an orderly manner. If people had something to say then let them say it, and let other people judge what was said. It was actually *good* for everyone to speak, one by one, so that everyone could learn and be comforted.

Did Paul say that all songs should be chosen by the song leader? Nope. In fact, the very position of "song leader" cannot be found in the New Testament! In order to find that position you need to go back to the sacrificial system. In the temple there

were priests who offered sacrifices and song leaders who led people in song – but the church wasn't designed to be like the temple. You won't find any passages in the New Testament where an apostle says "All songs must be chosen by the song leader, and everyone must do what he says. It's foolish and wrong for people to have their own songs."

Did Paul say that only seminary-trained pastors should speak in the service, and everyone else must remain silent? Nope. Instead he encourages *everyone* to speak so that everyone can learn. There's no passage anywhere in the Bible that says "If you aren't a pastor then you have no right to say anything. Let the pastor do all the preaching. Your job is to sit there silently." Paul seemed to think that everyone had something valuable to contribute and should be given an opportunity to say something. His only stipulation was that things should be done decently and in order.

Did Paul say that people should listen quietly to whatever the preacher said and accept it without question, because the pastor has attended seminary and you have no right to judge him? Nope. Instead Paul specifically stated that people *should* judge the message and comment on it. This means if the person who was speaking said something wrong, he could immediately be corrected.

Did Paul say that only one person is allowed to speak in a service? Nope. It may seem that "two or three" is a significant limitation, but you need to remember that New Testament churches met in very small groups in people's homes. Having three people teach in a setting where only 15 people were present is very different from having one person speak with three thousand are present (which is the situation we have today). Paul isn't saying that only the pastor has the right to speak. He's saying that things should be done in an orderly fashion.

We also need to remember that the early church met

every day:

Acts 2:46: "And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,"

Acts 5:42: "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ."

This doesn't mean that every day people drove across town and had a Sunday morning service. Instead people would gather to the home of their friend (who lived nearby). They would sing whatever songs they wanted to sing and pray whatever they wanted to pray. If they had something going on in their life they would talk about it. The group would study the Bible for a while and discuss it, asking whatever questions were necessary. The service had no predetermined length; it would last as long as it needed to. It might be only a few minutes long, or it might last all night and into the next morning:

Acts 20:7: "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight."

No one really cared how long or short the service was. There was no danger of running out of time. The people came together to worship God, and they were going to continue until they were done. They weren't interested in setting aside a fixed block of time on Sunday morning and then sticking to that schedule so they could get back home as soon as possible.

Since this was a small group, it was easy to get together frequently. It's true that perhaps not everyone could gather every day, but they met so frequently that it wasn't a problem. Since the group was small, people could make prayer requests. Since the service wasn't timed, they had all the time they needed to sing and pray and teach and ask questions. The sermons could be as short or long as they needed to be. If multiple people had something to share or teach then they could do it.

This meant the order of the service wasn't determined in advance. Instead it reflected the needs of the people. If someone was struggling with a problem then the group could help them. Also, in a group that small there's no need to keep sermons simple and basic. Since everyone knows everyone else, the pastor can preach sermons that address people's specific needs and situations, instead of preaching a random passage and hoping that somehow works out. In a small group it becomes possible to address specific situations – especially if everyone has the freedom to speak up and contribute.

Since so few people are participating in the service, it makes a big difference if people stop coming for a few weeks because *those people are no longer there to make their contribution*. If half the people are missing the service is going to be *very* different – and not nearly as good.

A pastor of a large church can't possibly get involved in the lives of five thousand people. However, it *is* possible for a small group to gather in someone's home and get to know one another, and become involved in each other's lives. In a setting like that you could see enormous spiritual change because you would finally be able to address the problems that people were actually having. The pastor could focus his preaching on areas where it was actually needed. He wouldn't be preaching at random anymore.

Could you imagine if a pastor preached a sermon that addressed your situation specifically? That would be impossible

in a large church, but not in a small house church. Which do you think would be more helpful to the congregation: random sermons that may have nothing to do with what they're struggling with, or messages that were preached specifically with them in mind that give them the exact answers they're looking for? If the goal of the church is to have big buildings then we should probably keep doing what we're doing. However, if the goal of the church is to help people grow spiritually and make disciples then we need a better system. Do you *really* think you can help people by preaching passages at random, instead of finding out what's actually going on in their life and using the Bible to address that situation? There may be times when it makes sense to preach the same generic message to 5000 people. However, if your goal is truly to help people grow then you need to put all your effort into having your "classroom sizes" be as small as possible so you can work with people individually and address their specific needs. The world outside the church understands this. When is the church going to learn this lesson?

I realize that some churches have what they call "small groups". That is where people meet in small groups (usually in people's homes) in order to do the things that can't be done in the Sunday morning service (like make prayer requests and ask questions). Here's my question: if you already have small groups then *why do you have anything else?* If people are already meeting in small groups in people's homes then you don't need an expensive building, with all the upkeep and maintenance that it requires. People can sing and pray and preach *in the small group*. The only thing the building provides is a chance for thousands of people to sit passively in chairs while someone preaches a generic sermon at them, *and that's precisely what we need to get away from*. I am not at all opposed to small groups (provided they aren't just "the Sunday Morning service performed on a smaller scale in a house"). I simply find it foolish to spend all that time and money on a building that you don't

need *because you already have small groups.*

It's A Bad Idea To Pay Pastors

One of the biggest problems in many churches is that congregations pay their pastors a full-time salary – in spite of the fact it's a huge burden on the church and puts them in a difficult financial position. Now, I realize it's not a sin to give the pastor a salary. After all, the apostle Paul does say this:

1 Corinthians 9:3-11: "Mine answer to them that do examine me is this, Have we not power to eat and to drink? Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working? Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock? Say I these things as a man? or saith not the law the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?"

That's a very strong statement! Paul makes it very clear

that there's nothing wrong with paying people for the spiritual services they provide. However, did Paul accept a salary from any of the churches that he ministered to? No, he did not. Instead he provided for his own financial needs by being a tentmaker so he wouldn't be a burden to the churches. He knew it would be hard for them to pay a salary and he didn't want to burden them with his expenses. Even though Paul had every right to ask churches to pay him in return for all he did for them, he refused to exercise that right:

1 Corinthians 9:12: "If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ."

Paul chose to pay his own way because he didn't want to hinder the gospel. Paul's life would have been a lot easier if he had taken money from the churches, and he had every right to take that money, but he refused to do it. The gospel was too important to him.

There are many churches in this country that are struggling financially. Do you know what their biggest expenses are? The building and the staff. If they didn't have a building (because they met in small groups in people's homes) and they didn't have to pay their staff, they would actually be fine. In fact, without those expenses they would have plenty of money to devote to missions – *which is one of the key tasks of the church*. It's an enormous financial burden for a church to pay multiple pastors, and a youth minister, and a song leader, and a secretary, and someone to clean the building, and someone to mow the lawn. That takes a lot of money that could be spent on *actually spreading the gospel*.

But suppose we did things the way we see in the New

Testament. If people met in small groups in people's homes then there would be no need to pay for a building. We wouldn't need to hire maintenance people or someone to take care of the church grounds. The pastor's job would be *much* easier because the group is small and everyone is contributing and speaking. There wouldn't be a need for him to spend 40 hours working on a sermon, because each time the church meets (which is very often) they would talk about whatever needed to be addressed that day, or the passage of Scripture they were all studying. Sermons wouldn't have to be a predetermined length, and all of the responsibility for teaching wouldn't fall on the pastor. Since everyone was helping one another, all the work wouldn't fall on the pastor – which means he would have time to work and provide for his family. As you can see, everything changes once you get rid of the church building and start meeting in small groups in people's homes. (The next time you're given a copy of your church's budget in a business meeting, look at all the money that's being spent on salaries and the church building. Now imagine if all that money was going to missions instead. Do you see what a huge difference that could make? Shouldn't we be doing everything possible to reduce our expenses so we can maximize our work in the mission field?)

There's another reason why it's not a good idea for churches to pay pastors, and that's because money is very corrupting. Pastors know that their salary depends on keeping their congregations happy. The congregation voted him into his position, and he knows they can vote him out just as easily if he upsets them. That means his job depends on not stirring things up. If he rebukes them or tells them something they don't want to hear, the congregation can easily get rid of him – and that means he won't be able to provide for his family or put food on the table. The moment you start paying your pastor you give him an *enormous* incentive to compromise. There are many pastors who avoid certain passages in the Bible because they know what

would happen to them if they ever preached them. There are many pastors who refuse to teach what the Bible actually says because they know they would be fired if they spoke up. Pastors really do avoid teaching certain truths in order to keep their jobs! That's how it works. (Have you ever noticed that when a pastor is preaching through a book of the Bible, he will skip right over the controversial verses and act like they're not there? That isn't an accident. I realize that your church and your pastor may not do that, but it's *very* common.)

Here's something to think about: what if pastors *weren't* paid? In that case they would be free to preach the truth. If the congregation got angry and voted him out, his livelihood wouldn't be in danger. He could just go find another church. It would be harder to pressure him to compromise because all of that leverage would be gone.

This means paying your church staff actually creates *two* problems: it puts an enormous financial burden on the congregation that in many cases they can't afford, and it puts pressure on the pastor to compromise the truth so he doesn't lose his job. (Are you starting to see the wisdom of meeting in small groups in people's homes? Do you see how many problems that could solve?)

There's actually a third problem as well. Pastors have been taught to look at their job as a career. They go to seminary and learn how to be pastor, and then find a small church somewhere to get started. After they've been there a few years they will find a position at a larger church somewhere else, where they will stay until a better position opens elsewhere. By hopping from church to church they can eventually navigate the system until they land a high-paying position at a really large church. If you play the game long enough you might even be able to get into a leadership position in the denomination itself. Pastors who know how to play their cards right could find themselves living in a large mansion and getting paid a salary

that's many times more than what anyone in their congregation makes. Some pastors even get private jets, which are paid for by people in their congregations who do *not* have private jets (or a mansion).

I realize that pastors don't usually come forward and say these things out loud – but their actions speak volumes. Have you ever noticed that nearly all pastors move to a different church after a few years? Have you ever noticed that pastors usually leave a small church to go to a bigger one, and then move to an even larger one after that? I realize this isn't always the case, but *this is extremely common*. Don't you find it a bit suspicious that somehow it's "God's will" for pastors to leave a small struggling church and move to a bigger church where they will be paid a larger salary – and then a few years later it will be "God's will" for them to leave that church to go to a church that's even bigger, and which pays them even more?

I have to ask: is it *really* God's will for pastors to change churches every few years? I think the answer is very clearly *no*, because that entire concept has no Biblical support at all. Jesus said that being a shepherd means taking care of your sheep, getting to know your sheep, and watching over your sheep. The person who abandons the sheep in order to enrich his own life is called hireling, and Jesus has nothing good to say about hirelings. In His eyes they aren't shepherds at all. A person who would lay down his life for his sheep is *entirely different* from someone who abandons his sheep the moment a better job becomes available at a larger church!

If churches met in small groups in people's homes then this would become a non-issue. If you're meeting with a few friends in your own house then you become focused on *nurturing them*, not trying to use them as a springboard to find a more lucrative job somewhere else. That's especially true if you're not getting paid in the first place! You also won't be tempted to leave for a bigger church because the congregation is

already limited by the capacity of your home.

For that matter, the whole process of acquiring a pastor doesn't make sense in the first place. Wouldn't it be much better to raise up people from within the small group to hold that job? After all, that's exactly how the church obtains deacons and elders! There's no reason for a church to hire someone from the opposite end of the country. It makes far more sense to find someone *within the church* who is qualified and help them grow into the job. If you pay someone to leave their current church and start preaching at your church, do you know what's going to happen? They're eventually going to leave you and go somewhere else. After all, *that's how you got them in the first place!* Besides, it's much easier to have an impact on someone's life if you've been with them for 20 years and they've stood by you the entire time. Why would you value the input of a pastor who's only there because you're paying them, who left other people to be with you, and who will leave you once someone gives them a better offer? How invested do you think someone like that is going to be in your church – or your life? Is that really what you want?

Church Membership Is Unbiblical

Let's suppose that you want to spend time with a group of people who are all Christians. Is that what you'll find when you attend a church service? Nope. Church services are open to everyone. Anyone can walk in – even people who aren't saved and who have never heard the gospel before. In fact, churches actually encourage this! They want as many people as possible to attend their services, and they *especially* want the unsaved to come. That's why they're always encouraging their members to invite people who don't know Jesus.

Pastors know that many of the people they are preaching to might not be saved. That's why services usually end with some sort of "altar call", in which people are asked to come to the front of the church and "give their life to Jesus". Some pastors like to draw this part of the service out as long as possible. They think if they play enough songs and work hard enough, then maybe they can coax someone into coming down and "getting saved". This certainly does have an effect. Since you're telling Christians every single service that they need to come forward and get saved, some Christians start to question their salvation. This results in people who have been saved for years coming forward over and over again. Why? Because that's what their pastor is telling them to do. (Are there ever times when someone who is *not* saved comes forward? It is *extremely* rare.)

Pastors are preaching to a large group of people that they don't really know. Some of them might be saved and others are probably not. A few of them might know the Bible pretty well, but most of them probably don't. Since they are preaching to such a large mixed audience, they have to keep their sermons very simple and basic. After all, they can't assume that their congregation knows anything. They can't go into any depth, and there isn't enough time to get into anything that's complicated or advanced. The best they can do is preach simple sermons on basic topics. Once you've been at church for a few years you will probably have heard everything the pastor has to offer. For the rest of your life, all of his sermons are going to repeat stuff you've heard before. In fact, you may reach a point where if the pastor was sick one day you could get up and say whatever he was going to say, because you've heard it so many times before. You're not going to hear anything new because pastors have to stick to the basics. Going to the Sunday morning service is like attending first grade forever. There are other grades out there, but because of the mixed nature of the congregation you're not going to find them in the service.

Is that how the early church worked? Absolutely not. The New Testament makes it clear that the only people who are allowed to gather with the church were *saved people*. Those who were unsaved were *not allowed to come!* In fact, if a person was living in sin and refused to repent then the Bible says he should be removed from the church entirely and not allowed to attend services anymore, because his sinful behavior might corrupt others:

1 Corinthians 5:7-13: "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

When the church gathers together to worship God, no unrepentant people are supposed to be in their midst. The gathering was never supposed to be a mix of Christians, and non-Christians, and people living openly sinful lives, and people who

hated God, and people who wandered into the wrong building. It was supposed to be *all dedicated Christians who were walking in God's ways*. Anyone who wasn't a Christian was excluded from the gathering. Anyone who was openly living in sin and refused to repent had to be excluded until they repented.

Did Paul say that we should be *proud* that we have unrepentant sinners in our midst? Absolutely not. In fact, he actually rebuked the church for allowing that:

1 Corinthians 5:1: "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you."

Paul said that anyone within the church who was living a flagrant life of sin should be a cause for *mourning*, and the church should remove this person from their midst. Instead of doing that, though, the Corinthian church actually *boasted* about having a sinful person in their midst! Paul told them that was the wrong thing to do:

1 Corinthians 5:6-7: "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. . ."

Paul is pointing out that it's very dangerous to have unrepentant people in their midst, because their wickedness will spread to other people. If one person is allowed to get away with sin, then other people will start thinking that maybe sin isn't so

bad. They will think that there are no consequences for sin, and they will be tempted to start doing the same thing.

Some people might argue that Paul is just saying they should have their membership privileges revoked but still allowed to attend. The problem with that argument is that the early church had no concept of "church membership", the way that churches do today. They viewed all Christians as belonging to one church – the church of Jesus Christ. The only question was whether people should be allowed to gather with them in their homes and attend their services. Paul was clear that these gatherings should *only be for Christians*, and no one else. Not only was it bad for people to attend who were living in sin, it was actually dangerous for the entire church!

This approach has a lot of advantages. It means that the pastor wouldn't need to spend time asking people to come forward and be saved because everyone he is preaching to is already saved. It means that Christians wouldn't be told every single week that they needed to accept Christ, because the pastor who was talking to them would know that they had already done that. If people met in small groups in people's homes, the pastor would be able to craft sermons that specifically addressed the people he was talking to. He would finally be able to preach deep and meaningful sermons because he knew what knowledge everyone had and could build upon that knowledge. The pastor wouldn't have to waste time preaching sermons that people had already heard a dozen times before. If we did things the Biblical way there would finally be a gathering place *specifically for Christians*.

How did the New Testament church reach the lost? They went out into the world and found them. They preached the gospel directly to the lost, and in their gathering places. They *went out to them*. They searched for them and found them instead of sitting back and hoping the lost would wander into their church buildings! That is a much better system for

everyone.

How did Christians in the New Testament become a member of the church? They did it by repenting of their sins and believing in Jesus. That's quite different from the way it's done today! The modern church believes that the church is *the building*, and in order to become a member in good standing with that building you have to go through a rite of passage. That process may involve a class or something else, but you can only become part of the church once you've passed through this rite. However, *there's nothing Biblical about that at all*. The Bible is clear that once you're saved you are part of the church, *period*. It's true that the Bible commands Christians to distance themselves from people who claim to be believers but who are living in open sin, but the Bible *never* calls any building "the church" and it never says anything about what we call "church membership". (There's also the fact that church membership is pretty useless. You can attend services for years without ever being a member. A lack of membership doesn't stop you from attending any classes or services that the church has to offer, and it doesn't stop you from taking communion either. The only thing it actually does is stop you from holding a church office – and, honestly, the only offices that are usually available to people are working in the nursery and being an usher. If you're not interested in doing either of those things then there's no real reason to ever join. It's true that it stops you from voting on things, but we'll get into voting a bit later in this series.)

The very language that we use demonstrates how unbiblical our views of the church really are. If we truly believed that the church was *the people* then we would never call a building "the church", and we would never call the process of giving people voting privileges "church membership".

Is it a good idea for churches to make sure that people who want to start fellowshiping with them really are Christians? Absolutely. But somehow people forget that *there is only one*

church, and that is the church that Christ founded by dying for our sins and rising on the third day. We become a member of that church when we repent of our sins and believe on Him.

Modern Christians have vastly overcomplicated "going to church". The truth is that you "go to church" when you meet with other Christians, because *Christians are the church*. From a Biblical standpoint, "going to church" has nothing to do with going to a specific building! This is what Jesus said about it:

Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

If two or three people are gathered together in the name of Jesus, then Jesus is with those people. They have "gone to church", even if they didn't drive across town and walk into a building.

Is it important for Christians to gather together in the name of Jesus? Absolutely. In fact, it is commanded:

Hebrews 10:23-25: "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."

Are we supposed to assemble ourselves together in the name of Jesus? Absolutely! Does this verse say that we need a dedicated building in order to do that, and it only counts if we gather into that building? Nope. In fact, buildings aren't even mentioned! What *is* mentioned is the need to exhort one

another. The verse has nothing to say about having a multi-million-dollar facility with a restaurant and a library and a basketball court, but it does say we need to provoke one another to good works.

Here's a question for you: if you attend a Sunday morning service, can you provoke anyone to good works? Nope. Your job in the service is to sit there quietly along with everyone else, and then go home. Can you exhort anyone? Nope. Only the pastor is allowed to speak; everyone else must be silent. It may be true that *technically* a group of Christians have indeed gathered together into the same room, but that group has not been "assembled" in any meaningful way. The New Testament pictures the church as a dynamic body that's composed of many different parts, and each person has something valuable to contribute that the church needs. The modern church, however, is run by the paid staff, who (along with the deacons and elders) do everything while the congregation sits there passively and does nothing. Do you really think that's what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he told us to assemble ourselves together? Do you think he was hoping that we would gather together in a room, sit quietly for 90 minutes, and then go home without interacting with anyone else?

I realize it's possible to form relationships with other people who attend church. *But that must be done outside of the service.* It's possible to ask questions and get help and make prayer requests, *but that must be done outside of the service.* The reason people gather together on Sunday mornings is to attend that service, *but the service provides no opportunities for people to do anything!* If you want to provoke one another to good works and exhort one another, *which are some of the key reasons why we should assemble in the first place,* you have to do that outside of the service. Do you see the problem?

As if that wasn't bad enough, most people *only go to the Sunday morning service.* I realize that once a month the church

might allow people to gather together and share a meal (which is a far cry from the early church, which ate together *daily*). There may also be the occasional church function. But the Sunday morning service is the primary way that the congregation interacts with each other, and it's specifically designed to *keep the congregation from interacting with each other*. (Allowing people sixty seconds during the service to turn to their neighbors and say "Hi" doesn't count as a meaningful interaction.)

Voting Is Unbiblical

It's really amazing how much of a gap there is between the way the Bible says the church should be run, and the way the church is actually run. For example, nearly everything in the modern church is decided by voting. Deacons are voted in. Elders are voted in. Pastors are voted in. Major decisions are voted in. Churches hold business meetings to vote on church expansion, or new church policies, or even solving plumbing problems. The local church is run by the congregation, and they make their will known by the process of voting.

This has some very important consequences. Since churches can vote pastors in, they can also vote them out. This means the pastor knows his job depends on keeping the congregation happy. He knows that if he tells them things they don't want to hear, or he rebukes them for a sin that's common in their midst, they might get angry with him and vote him out. If the pastor wants to keep his job then he'll have to please the congregation. That puts a lot of pressure on him to avoid talking about hard doctrines and unpleasant truths. This is why it's very rare for pastors to call out a church for the sin in their midst that needs to be dealt with, or to address the big issues that have been crippling the church. His job depends on keeping people

happy, so that's what he is going to do. If the church happens to find a pastor that isn't willing to compromise what the Bible teaches, they will usually get rid of him in short order and replace him with someone else. That means churches will usually be run by pastors who aren't going to challenge them, or correct them, or rebuke them.

Is that good for the church? Definitely not. Do you know what would happen if children had the power to veto their parents, and could always get their way and reject all instruction? They would grow up to be uncontrollable, spoiled brats. I think that's exactly why so many churches are spiritually dead. The Bible puts it this way:

2 Timothy 4:2-3: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."

Paul warned of a time when Christians would hate sound doctrine and would get rid of sound teachers so they could listen to lies that they found more enjoyable than the truth. That's exactly the situation we are in today! Why would people listen to someone who was going to rebuke them for their sin when they could vote him out and replace him with a pastor who would tell them what they wanted to hear? That is exactly what's going to happen if the sheep are given the ability to vote out their shepherd. It's inevitable.

Is that how the Bible says that churches should be organized? Does the Bible say that congregations should vote for their pastors? Actually, no. You won't find that teaching

anywhere in the Bible. In fact, no church anywhere in the New Testament ever made *any* decision by voting! Now, that is *not* because people in ancient times didn't understand the concept of voting. Ancient Greece predated the New Testament by centuries, and it was a democracy. By the time the New Testament was written the concept of voting was hundreds of years old.

Do you know how people in the Bible *did* make decisions? They cast lots (which means, essentially, they flipped a coin). That's how the disciples chose the replacement for the traitor Judas:

Acts 1:23-26: "And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles."

If the modern church wanted to choose an apostle today and had two equally qualified candidates to choose from, it would never consider casting lots! Instead they would put it to a vote, and the most popular person would win. In the Bible, though, *no church ever does that*. Why? Because it's a bad idea. It's much wiser to cast lots:

Proverbs 18:18: "The lot causeth contentions to cease, and parteth between the mighty."

Why does casting lots cause contentions to cease?

Because everyone understands that it's fair. No one can accuse anyone of partiality or underhanded dealing. On top of that, the Bible says that God governs the outcome of casting lots:

Proverbs 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD."

This doesn't mean that people in ancient times had some special mystical dice that they used to make decisions. The verse is saying that God controls everything – including the outcome of casting lots. When the disciples replaced Judas, they looked for candidates that matched the Biblical qualifications and found two who were equally qualified. Since either of them would work, they prayed that God would show them His will and then cast lots, trusting that the outcome of the lots would be the will of God. Why did they put that much faith in casting lots? Because of Proverbs 16:33. Do you see how different their thinking was from ours?

Notice that they didn't tell everyone to go home and pray, and then waited for someone to step forward and say "God spoke to me and told me that we should do X." After all, how could you ever prove that God really *did* speak to that person? Instead they cast lots, which settled the matter.

The point I'm trying to make is that what the Bible teaches is *completely different* from the way we do things in our churches. There's no Biblical support for church buildings, and no apostle ever suggested we needed them or should have them. There's no Biblical support for a church service that consists of the congregation being told exactly what to sing and what to pray, and then being preached at in silence for 30 minutes before being sent home. We may think that it makes sense for the congregation to sit passively and contribute nothing to the service while the paid staff does everything, but you won't find that model anywhere in the Bible. We may think it's natural to

have 5000 people attend a single church service, which is held by a pastor who doesn't know the people who are attending his own church, but you won't find that in the Bible. We may think it makes sense for people who are in trouble to file a form and make an appointment and then pay for counseling services, but that's not how Jesus said churches should handle their lost sheep. The truth is no New Testament church was ever operated the way that modern churches operate!

Did the early church vote on who should be pastors and elders and deacons? No. Did they have business meetings? No. Instead the Bible established a series of qualifications that must be met in order to take on certain roles within the church. People who didn't meet those qualifications were excluded from the position, and there was no restriction on how many pastors or deacons or elders there could be in a church. (The Bible never says there should be a "head pastor" or a "youth pastor". Those positions have been made up and have no Biblical support.) If for some reason there *was* a limit and you had more qualified people than you had open positions, then you could cast lots. No voting was needed.

What do you do if someone is living in open sin? You remove them from the congregation. What do you do if the pastor is wicked? In that case he is living in open sin, so he would be removed – without any need to vote him out. What do you do if the pastor is preaching heresy and false teaching? That would also be open sin, so he would be removed without any need to vote him out. What do you do if the pastor is not very good? You train him – and there's no reason why you can't have more than one pastor (especially if you aren't paying them a salary). What do you do if the pastor preaches something that's true but the congregation doesn't want to hear it? *You keep him*. If your church is organized along Biblical lines then there isn't a need to vote on anything. (You're not going to be voting on new air conditioners for the building if you don't have a building in the

first place!) If your congregation finds a need to vote on things then there's probably something wrong with the way your local church is organized.

Churches Must Not Avoid Politics

In this country churches are organized as non-profit corporations. (That's right: from a legal standpoint *they are a business.*) The advantage to this is that all contributions made to these churches are tax deductible. The disadvantage is that in order to maintain their non-profit status they have to abide by certain rules, and one of those rules is that they can't be political.

You may not realize this, but before modern times it was very common for churches to preach on political topics. This is because pastors understood that the Bible governs *all* aspects of life, including the government. The Bible really does have something to say about healthcare, and the economy, and laws, and regulations. It really does talk about how society should work, and what laws should exist, and what justice looks like. Pastors used to preach sermons on the government all the time. In fact, during the colonial era they even preached about the constitution that had been proposed by the founding fathers. They wanted to analyze it from a Biblical standpoint and see if it measured up to the standard defined in the Word of God.

Today churches avoid politics altogether. In fact, churches actually take great pride in having nothing to say about politics and not taking any stance on any political issue. However, *this is not an improvement!* Since pastors avoid the subject altogether, congregations often have no idea how to look at the government from a Biblical standpoint. They don't know how to think about a law from a Biblical standpoint. People have been taught that politics has nothing to do with Christianity, so when people think

about political subjects they keep the Bible far away from their thinking. *This is very bad.*

Does God have anything to say about what's right and wrong? Of course. Does God define justice? Yes He does. Does God have anything to say to kings, or nations, or governments? Absolutely! Does the Bible tell us how nations should treat each other? Yes it does. Can the Bible teach us the difference between a just law and an unjust one? Yes, it can. Are pastors going to bring any of this up? Absolutely not.

The truth is that Christianity applies to *all of life*. It's not something that we should just do on Sunday mornings and then put on the shelf for the rest of the week! Christianity should impact how we think about *all of our life* – including the way that the government operates. Pastors should teach people how to have a Biblical worldview, and that worldview should apply to *everything*. Instead of doing that, though, pastors ignore politics and pretend that God has no interest in the subject at all.

One reason they do that is because there are a lot of different views in a given congregation, and if they took a stand on something it might make people angry. (This goes back to the fact that churches are attended by saved people and lost people and people who claim to be saved but who are living in sin. If congregations removed the unrepentant sinners from their midst, which is what the Bible commands, then this wouldn't be a problem. Do you see how many problems we could fix if we did things God's way?) If pastors make their congregations angry then that could cost them their jobs. (Do you see how much trouble is caused by voting?) Since churches pay the pastor's salary that would impact their ability to feed their families. (Do you see how much trouble is caused when pastors depend on churches for money?) The other reason is that if a church starts preaching on politics then it might lose its tax-exempt status, and that could have a big impact on the amount of money it receives (and the money they have to pay in taxes). Churches need a lot

of money in order to pay for their large building and their large staff. (Do you see how much trouble is caused by having church buildings?) In the end churches need money, and to get that money they're willing to make whatever compromises are necessary.

Do you think God is honored when churches refuse to teach what the Bible has to say in order to get more money? I very seriously doubt it. I can't imagine a pastor standing before God and hearing Him say "I'm so glad you sold out the Bible in order to keep your tax-exempt status! That was definitely the right call. It's important to throw out whatever doctrines you need to in order to keep that money flowing." Yet that is *exactly* what churches do. Pastors know there would be serious consequences if they taught the full counsel of God, so they don't teach it. (How do we know that they don't teach it? Well, ask yourself this: how many political sermons have you heard in your life? If you've been attending the typical Protestant church, the answer is *zero*. So clearly they're avoiding the subject.) Churches know they might get in financial trouble if they taught how the Bible applies to politics and the government, so they don't go there. They avoid the subject entirely.

Would this be a problem in a small home church? Nope. That church wouldn't need a budget to operate, so it would be fine. Its pastor would already be working a full-time job to pay his salary, so his livelihood wouldn't be in danger. The money that the church received could go directly to outreach and mission work. It's true that people wouldn't be able to claim their offerings as a tax deduction, but I think God would rather have a faithful church than a rich one. How do we know that? Because that's exactly what Jesus Himself said to the church of Laodicea:

Revelation 3:17-19: "Because thou sayest, *I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of*

nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent."

That congregation was convinced that God approved of them because they were rich and prosperous. Was God impressed? Absolutely not! God saw that their spiritual condition was appalling and wretched, so He rebuked them and commanded them to repent. They may have had money, but they didn't have the things that really mattered. They weren't faithful in the sight of God. They weren't zealous for the truth or passionate about preaching the full counsel of God. In fact, verse 15 tells us they actually didn't care about the truth at all. They were indifferent – so God told them they made Him want to vomit.

If the government ever comes to a church and says "I will give you money as long as you avoid certain subjects", the answer of the church should *always* be a firm "No". It doesn't matter how small or harmless the compromise may seem. God requires us to preach and teach *everything!* This is how Jesus put it:

Matthew 4:4: "But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

There are no doctrines we are allowed to disavow in order to win the approval of others. God is never going to tell

you "I'm so glad you sold out the truth in exchange for money. That was the right call." Do you honestly believe that the nation is better off when Christians have no idea how to apply Biblical principles to the operation of the government? That seems pretty unlikely to me!

I'm not saying that churches should endorse political parties or specific candidates. What I *am* saying is that pastors ought to teach people how to think Biblically about *all* of life. Excluding politics from the discussion is very wrong.

Families Should Worship Together

When it comes to church services, the modern church is eager to separate families from their children as much as possible. Churches that have Sunday School have special classes just for children (which are strictly divided by age). At the beginning of the Sunday morning service, children are dismissed to go attend a separate service that doesn't include their parents. Churches often hold events that are specifically targeted at children (once again, divided by age groups). They even have a youth pastor whose entire job is to minister to children.

Is any of this Biblical? Nope. You won't find any youth ministers in the New Testament. You also won't find any churches that sent children to a separate service so they could worship away from their parents. No apostle ever suggested that people should be divided up into groups based on their age, or that it was best for children to not worship alongside their parents. That's not how things were done in the New Testament!

You know what we *do* find? We find that children actually stayed right beside their parents. When Joshua read the Mosaic Law to the nation, the children weren't separated from their parents and sent to children's church:

Joshua 8:34-35: "And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them."

How much of the Law did Joshua read to the people – including to the children who were present? Every single word. Did he leave anything out? No. Did he leave the curses out? No. Did he leave the unpleasant parts out? No. Did he send the children off so that the adults could talk? No. The family stayed together.

Are there any passages in the Bible that suggest children would be better off if they were taken away from their parents and taught separately? No. Do you know who God has put in charge of teaching children? Their parents. God wants *their parents* to teach them His Law:

Deuteronomy 6:6-9: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates."

Who can teach children when they are sitting at the

house, and lying down to sleep, and rising up? The parents. Does God ever suggest that parents should outsource that responsibility to pastors? Absolutely not. Parents need to take responsibility for their children and raise them up in the Lord. Parents should teach their children about God, and children should worship God alongside their parents.

But what about the topics that aren't necessarily appropriate for children? Here's the thing: those topics are almost *never* mentioned in churches. It's extremely rare for anything to come up that might be inappropriate for children – especially since Joshua didn't have any qualms about reading the entire Mosaic Law to little children! If there's a need to talk about something that might not be wise to share with children then it makes sense to remove them for that specific conversation, but that is a very rare case. Children should be with their parents as much as possible.

In a small group setting this makes a lot of sense, because you're talking about a group of maybe 15 people that's meeting in a home. The services that we find in the New Testament are interactive. People talk to one another, they expound on the Word of God, they share a meal, and they contribute to each other's lives. In a service like that children could learn from others and from their parents because the family unit isn't a passive participant anymore! How do you grow wise? By spending time with wise people – *not* by spending time with people who happen to be the same age that you are.

I'm not saying it's bad for children to have friends that are their own age. What I am saying is that it makes no sense to send children away when it's time for the Sunday morning service. You aren't showing up at church in order to be entertained, and you don't need age-appropriate entertainment for your children. There are simply no Biblical grounds for dividing a church service into groups based on age. How can the young possibly learn from the life experiences of the elderly if they're kept in separate

classes?

God Never Gave Pastors The Power To Marry People

The procedure for getting married in our society is pretty well understood. First you have to go and get a marriage license, and then you have to find someone to perform the marriage. When it comes to performing the marriage ceremony people typically have two options: they can go down to the courthouse and get married by a justice of the peace, or they can find a pastor and have him do the job. This procedure is so commonplace that people don't even think twice about it. If you ask someone "Who married you?" they will typically give you the name of their pastor – because people believe that pastors have the ability to take two people and join them together in marriage.

But do they *really* have that ability? Stop and think about it. What gives pastors the ability to join people in holy matrimony? Who gave them that power? I'm being serious here. Where did this ability come from?

You can check the Bible, but you won't find it there. The Bible gives pastors many responsibilities: they are to preach the gospel, take care of their flocks, baptize people, and so forth, but the Bible *never* gives them the power to marry people. It's never even *mentioned!* Jesus Christ charged the church with going into all the world, making disciples, and baptizing people, but He *never* mentioned the idea that His church should be marrying people. He didn't even hint at it.

The apostles wrote a lot of letters to various churches and told them how to follow the Lord, but they never mentioned the idea that churches should be involved with marrying people. They talked about feeding the poor, healing the sick, making

converts, and even church discipline, but they never mentioned churches holding marriage ceremonies – *not a single time*.

In fact, no church in the entire Bible ever performed a marriage! No disciple, apostle, or deacon ever performed a wedding in the Bible. There are no cases where a pastor took two people and married them. *It never happened*.

What I'm trying to say is this: the idea that pastors have the ability to unite two people in marriage *doesn't come from the Bible*. There's absolutely nothing in the Bible that says pastors can do that, and there's nothing that says churches ought to be involved in performing marriages. *It's not there*. I understand that churches have decided to take that role upon themselves, but God didn't give them that responsibility.

That means pastors *do not* have the power to unite people in marriage. Pastors have no more power to marry people than insurance agents or electricians. I understand that people believe they need to find pastor in order to get married, but there's no Biblical basis for that. It may be traditional, but it's man's tradition – not God's.

So who *does* have the power to marry people? Well, according to Jesus Christ, only one person can do that:

Matthew 19:4-6: "And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore **God hath joined together**, let not man put asunder."

Who has the power to take two people and joins them together in marriage? *God does*. Only the Lord has that power!

No mortal being can unite people in marriage because God is the one who does the joining. How does it work? Well, it's pretty simple. Jesus said that a man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife, and God unites them into one. That's literally what the verse says. At that point they have been joined together. They are no longer two people; instead they are one flesh.

Here's what that means in practical terms. In the marriage ceremony, the marriage license itself means nothing. Regardless of whether or not it's required from a legal standpoint (which is a complex topic far beyond the scope of this discussion), that piece of paper carries no weight with God. Having a marriage license is *not* what makes you married, and *not* having one doesn't mean you *aren't* married. After all, Adam and Eve didn't have a marriage license but the Bible tells us they were husband and wife. There are many societies that never had marriage licenses or pastors to marry people, but that doesn't mean those societies didn't have marriage. To God a marriage license is just a meaningless piece of paper. It carries no weight with Him and has no authority.

Likewise, at the end of the ceremony, when the pastor says "I now pronounce you man and wife", his pronouncement means nothing. Saying those words does *not* make the couple married, and *not* saying those words doesn't leave them unmarried. What the pastor says is *utterly irrelevant!* The truth is *he should not be involved in this anyway.* God never told him to marry people, nor did the Lord give him permission to do that!

What unites people in marriage is when, as Jesus said in Matthew 19, the man takes the woman to be his wife, and the wife takes the man to be her husband, and the two make a lifelong covenant together in the sight of God. When the couple exchanges their vows and commits to being husband and wife, at that point they're married because *God* joins them together. You don't need a pastor to get married, and you don't need official recognition from the government. Marriages that don't involve

pastors, churches, or governments are not somehow "fake". God never says you need a pastor or a license in order to have a binding marriage. The traditions of men aren't the same thing as the commandments of God! We should be looking to *the Bible* to see how marriage works.

Does the marriage become official when it's consummated? Nope. That's *not* what makes two people a married couple! We know this because Adam and Eve were referred to as husband and wife long before they consummated their union. Take a look for yourself. This is Genesis 2:25:

Genesis 2:25: "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed."

Eve is referred to as Adam's wife *immediately*, as soon as she was created and given to Adam. However, their relationship wasn't consummated until much later – after they sinned and were kicked out of the garden of Eden:

Genesis 4:1: "And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord."

If that's not enough evidence for you, here's something else to consider. God has always been very clear that sex is only permissible *within* marriage. Sex within marriage is good, but sex outside of marriage is a serious sin. This means you have to *already be married* before you can have sex. Therefore the marriage must take place *first* – which means that the act of the physical union *cannot* be part of the marriage process!

Adam and Eve are a great example of how marriage works. God brought Eve to Adam, Adam accepted her as his wife, and they became a married couple. This is despite the fact there was no marriage license, and there was no pastor to pronounce

them married. (I would like to add that witnesses are a very good idea because they will provide evidence that the marriage happened, and will hold the couple to the fact that they truly are married). All it took to marry them was their covenant to each other, which was made in the sight of God. That was enough.

The reason this matters is because we've come to believe that people are united in marriage *by other people*, instead of by God. This leads to the idea that since the marriage was *created* by other people, it can also be dissolved by other people. Since the government grants the marriage, the government can grant the divorce.

But as we've seen, the government has absolutely *nothing to do* with uniting people in marriage! Likewise, pastors are *not* part of the process (no matter what they claim). God is the one who unites people in marriage, which means only God can dissolve the marriage. You can go down to the courthouse and get a divorce, but all the government can give you is a piece of paper that carries no weight in the sight of God. The courthouse isn't the one who married you in the first place; God was the one who did that. This means *God has to grant your divorce*. If He doesn't then *you don't have one*; in His sight you are still married to your original spouse.

Divorce is a very complex subject, and I don't have the time to cover it in detail here. There are definitely valid reasons to get a divorce, and in some cases it is absolutely the right thing to do and God definitely recognizes the divorce. The point I want to make is that God is the one who united you in marriage in the first place (not your pastor or the government), and only God can separate you. If you divorce your spouse for an unbiblical reason (which is too complicated a subject to get into here), then God doesn't recognize your divorce *and still considers you to be married to your original spouse*. Just because you consider yourself to be divorced does *not* necessarily mean that God agrees with you. If you didn't get divorced for a Biblical reason

(for example, if you left your faithful wife and children in order to move in with another, younger woman who you thought was hotter) then God considers you to be having an affair and living in sin with someone you are *not* married to. That may seem like a technical detail, but we must remember that when it comes time for us to die we will stand before God and be held accountable for the things we have done. Our actions really do have consequences.

Altar Calls Are Unbiblical

Are altar calls Biblical? Now, I realize this might seem like a strange question to ask. After all, altar calls have become a staple of the modern church, to the point where it's hard to imagine a Sunday morning service that *doesn't* have an altar call. Who could possibly object to ending a sermon with an invitation to come forward and be saved? Isn't that just the natural thing to do?

Altar calls have become a tradition – in fact, they have almost become a sacrament in our churches. Because of this we don't stop to think about what we're actually doing. We simply accept them and assume that altar calls must be a good idea – but I think it's time we took a Biblical look at what we're doing. We should always be willing to compare every aspect of our churches to what's revealed in the Word of God. There should be nothing that's "too important" to examine from a Biblical perspective. If altar calls are a solid Biblical practice then it should be a simple matter to demonstrate that from the Bible, right? But if the Bible *doesn't* support this practice then that should tell us something.

The first point I'd like to make is that there are no altar calls anywhere in the Bible. Altar calls are completely unknown in

the Old Testament. In the New Testament no church is ever said to have used one, and they aren't mentioned in any of the letters to the churches. The disciples never used an altar call in any of their sermons, and even Jesus Himself never used altar calls.

Some people try very hard to find an altar call in the Bible, but it can't be done because *there aren't any*. People are so desperate to find an example of this practice that they claim Melchizedek's meeting with Abraham was an altar call:

Genesis 14:18: "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.

19 And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth:

20 And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all."

Just take a look at that passage for yourself! Does Melchizedek ask his audience to come to the front of the church and pray the sinner's prayer so they can be saved from their sins? Absolutely not. This isn't even *remotely* an altar call! No one is urging sinners to repent of their sins and put their faith and trust in Christ – and yet people still claim that this is Biblical proof that altar calls are Scriptural. A simple reading of the passage demonstrates that this simply isn't true.

There are no altar calls anywhere in the Bible! It's not a Biblical practice, and there's no Scriptural support for that idea. Now, that doesn't mean that no one in the Bible preached the gospel, because they most certainly did. Many people preached repentance and urged sinners to turn away from their sins:

Matthew 3:1-2: "In those days came John the

Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matthew 4:17: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Acts 2:38: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

There are many more examples that I could give, but I think you get the point. There's no shortage of preaching in the Bible! What we *don't* find are altar calls. Even when Jesus ministered to thousands of people for several days in a row, He never wrapped up by urging people to come to the front of the group to be saved. That simply never happened.

In our days that would be unthinkable, wouldn't it? If a modern church had a group of thousands of people, they would conclude the service by playing some sort of emotional hymn. The pastor would ask everyone to close their eyes, and urge the people to pray a certain prayer. The pastor would then say that if they prayed that prayer then they're saved. (Instead of praying that prayer in their seats while no one is looking, some pastors invite people to come to the front of the church to pray that prayer.) This practice is so common that it doesn't usually cross our minds that no one in the Bible ever did anything like this.

But the truth is the altar call is a modern phenomenon. It's entirely absent from the Bible, and the early church didn't practice it. The altar call was popularized by Charles Finney, who lived from 1792 to 1875. There were a few isolated cases where altar calls were used before then in some special circumstances,

but Finney is the person who popularized it. That means *altar calls were unknown to the church before the 19th century*. They are something new! I'd also like to point out that while Finney was a well-known evangelist, he was far from orthodox. Finney rejected the doctrine of original sin and he didn't believe in the imputed righteousness of Christ (which is the doctrine that when we're saved God gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ, and that's why we are justified in His sight). He also rejected the idea of Biblical regeneration – that people are made new creatures in Christ after they're saved.

Finney believed that in order to save people, all you had to do was put the right kind of emotional pressure on them and use the right kind of tricks, and you could drive them to the altar and get them to say that magical prayer. He also believed in the "prayer of faith", which to him meant that God was required to give you anything you prayed for. If you prayed that 100 souls would be saved by your preaching, then God was required to save 100 souls no matter what. (Needless to say, there are very serious theological problems with that idea.)

This was the mindset of the person who created the altar call, and this was the theology behind it. People today have accepted Finney's ideas regarding what it takes to get people saved – and that's unfortunate, because what the Bible teaches about salvation is radically different. The modern approach to salvation is extremely shallow and produces many false converts. The church isn't doing a very good job of explaining to people what salvation actually requires.

For example, take this account:

I recall a conversation in America in which a pastor's wife narrated to me her experience as a counselor. In counseling someone who came forward [to the altar] she discovered that this enquirer had no concept of repentance or faith.

She endeavored therefore to explain the gospel in a simple manner. The leader of the meeting in the meantime began to be impatient and after about ten minutes could stand it no longer. Sweeping the woman counselor aside, he took over as follows:

"You don't want to go to hell, do you?"

"No!"

"You want to go to heaven, don't you?"

"Yes, I do!"

"You believe that Christ died for sinners, don't you?"

"Yes, I do!"

"Then let's give thanks that he died for you and has given you salvation."

Then the leader prayed as follows: "Lord, I thank you for giving this soul eternal life. Thank you, Lord, Amen."

Then, turning to the person in question, he said, "Now you have eternal life and you can praise the Lord! Go and tell your friends that you have been saved!"

(The Great Invitation, Hulse, p109)

Was that person actually saved? I very seriously doubt it. He had no idea what faith was and he had no concept of repentance. On top of that, the prayer itself was prayed by *the leader*, not by the individual! The person never repented of his sins or gave his life to Jesus. I'd like to point out that even *demons* believe that Christ died for sinners, and demons would much rather go to Heaven than be cast into Hell! Demons, though, *are not saved*.

You see, being saved isn't just a matter of believing that Christ died for sinners. You also have to *repent*. You must go to Jesus and ask Him to forgive your sins. You must submit yourself

to Christ, which means turning away from your sins and walking in God's ways. Salvation is far more than just a mental assertion of "Yes, Jesus died for sins"! In order to be saved you must *surrender to God*. You must stop your rebellion against God and give Him complete control over your life, your will, your thoughts, your possessions, and your actions.

You also need to understand who Christ is and what He did. For example:

Romans 10:9: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

Notice that belief in the resurrection is part of the requirements for salvation! The verse also says that you *must* make Jesus your Lord. You *cannot* be saved by saying "Yes, Lord, I believe that you died for sinners and I want to go to Heaven, but I'm not going to obey you and I don't want you to tell me what to do. Just mind your own business and do whatever I tell you, and we'll get along fine." That is *not* salvation!

During altar calls churches tell people that if they come forward and pray a prayer, they will be saved – but that is not a true statement. *It's not the prayer that saves you!* The prayer of salvation is not a magical spell that saves people by the mere act of repeating the words. It takes more than that! Does the sinner actually understand the gospel? Are they repenting of their sins? Do they actually believe in the person and work of Christ? Are they abandoning their rebellion against God and submitting themselves to His authority? The answer to these questions is *extremely important*. The only thing that can save people is *faith in Christ*. If that is absent then the prayer won't do any good. We are saved by *faith*:

Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."

Notice that this passage *doesn't* say "You are saved by praying the sinner's prayer, regardless of what you believe or whether you've actually repented!" *But that is precisely how people treat the sinner's prayer.*

The great danger of altar calls is that they are extremely shallow. They don't get into any of these core issues about salvation. Instead they teach people that if they just say certain magical words then they can escape Hell. So what do people do? They come to the front of the church, they recite that prayer, and they go away believing they're saved. Doesn't that seem like a dangerous thing to be doing?

The church then makes things even worse by pronouncing that person to be saved right there on the spot. That is a terrible thing to do! How can you possibly know in that moment if that person was actually saved? Nowhere does the Bible say "If you go to the front of the church, recite a prayer, and feel good about yourself afterward, you are saved" – but that's how *countless* people verify their salvation. The Biblical way of making sure that you're saved is to examine your life for the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The book of 1 John has a whole list of tests that you can use to examine your life for evidence that you really have changed and you truly have become a new person. Do you love other Christians? Do you obey God? Have you confessed your sins? Are you growing in holiness? Have you abandoned your old wicked ways? Are you remaining in the faith?

The only way to tell if a person has been saved is to wait and see, and evaluate their lives against the objective criteria that the Bible has given us. The proof of their salvation can be

found in the life that they lead. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit. Genuine conversions always result in a changed life, because we become a new creature in Christ:

2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

If there is no change in that person's life and they continue living sin and depravity then they aren't a Christian. The prayer that they prayed was a waste of time, and responding to the altar call did nothing. Their conversion was phony. But you know something? *That's not something you can determine during the altar call!* Churches have absolutely no business pronouncing anyone saved on the spot.

If the prayer "didn't work", the problem isn't with Christ. Jesus is clear that He will reject no one:

John 6:37: "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

The problem is with what churches are doing. It's true that if you put a lot of emotional pressure on people and use the right manipulative tactics, you might be able to get people to come to the front of the church and recite a prayer that you've told them to pray. *But that's very different from getting saved!* Reciting that prayer doesn't mean that the person understood or believed the gospel. It doesn't mean have any idea what Christ actually did for them on the cross. It doesn't mean they're sorry for their sins or are willing to turn away from them. It *especially* doesn't mean that the person is laying down their life and

pledging to submit themselves to Christ.

It's that last point which is especially relevant in our modern age. Churches are filled with people who believe that Christ died for sinners, but who have absolutely no intention of obeying God. These people love their sins and don't have the slightest intention of turning away from them. They believe that they can continue to live a life of open sin, and God will have to take whatever He can get. The idea that you must repent of your sins and live a holy life is completely foreign to them. They would never agree to such a thing because they love their sins too much.

These people *are not saved*. The apostle John makes this point very clear:

I John 2:3-5: "And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him."

The modern church may call these people "carnal Christians" and say that they're just not very spiritual, but the Bible calls them what they are: *lost people*. In order to be saved you must accept Jesus as your Savior *and* your Lord. If you reject Him as Lord and insist that *you* will control your life, then you aren't saved at all.

But altar calls gloss over all these critically important issues. They don't give people a deep understanding of the gospel; instead they say "Pray this prayer and you'll go to Heaven". They don't test the person to see if he actually understands what he's doing or believes in the gospel; instead they use high-pressure tactics to get people to say a set of

magical words. On top of all that, altar calls assure the person that they're saved right then and there – instead of applying the Biblical tests that separate true conversions from false ones. As a result, our churches are filled with people who may not understand the gospel at all, and who may not have actually repented, but who are nonetheless convinced that they're saved because they once went to the front and recited a prayer. That is a very bad situation!

Here's something to think about: of all those people who come to the altar to "get saved", how many of them show any fruits of repentance?

Matthew 3:7-8: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:"

When ten thousand people respond in one of the great evangelistic crusades, do we see the lives of those people transformed? How many of those people lead holy lives and display the fruits of the Spirit? You know the answer as well as I do: most of those people are never seen again. They go right back to their sinful lives.

There are some people in churches who come to the altar to "get saved" over, and over, and over again. The reason they do this is because they don't understand the gospel and they have no idea how to tell if they're actually saved or not. They think that being saved is some kind of warm feeling, and since they don't have that feeling anymore they must not be saved. So they go to the front of the church to try to get that feeling again, and then announce to the world that this time they've *really* been saved. That entire line of thinking is completely unbiblical, but

that's the sort of mindset the church has been encouraging. The church has exchanged the Biblical understanding of the gospel for a shallow one that's designed to drive as many people as possible to the front of the church.

It may seem completely harmless to urge people to come to the front of the church to be saved – but is it? The church has taught generations of people that coming to the front of the church and reciting a prayer is the same thing as getting saved. That is completely different from what the Bible has to say about the matter! In fact, I'm very concerned that we're actually inoculating people from the gospel. After all, once a person has gone to the front of the church and recited that prayer, they believe they're saved *because that's what pastors tell them*. Even if they're leading an incredibly wicked life that's utterly devoid of faith or godliness, it's impossible to tell that person "You need to repent and believe". Since they believe they're already saved, they won't listen to anything you have to say. They have been taught a false standard of faith, and that blocks the Biblical standard from ever reaching them.

Now, if a person is feeling conviction for their sins and wants to talk to the pastor about it, I think that's a good thing. A thorough conversation could do that person a lot of good and lead them to Christ – but that's not what altar calls are. I fear that our approach to salvation has *not* been saving people at all, but instead has been immunizing them against the gospel and setting them on the road to Hell. Are there people who have been saved through altar calls? Of course – but the number of people who respond and then are never seen again is far, *far* greater. Should we really be using a method that rarely works, that produces many false converts, and which has no Biblical support whatsoever? I don't think so.

You might wonder: if altar calls are not Biblical then what should churches be doing? It's an easy question to answer. We should preach the gospel:

I Corinthians 1:18-24: "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God."

Notice that Paul didn't say "If you want to get people saved, play a soft hymn and urge them to come to the front of the church to recite the following prayer. If people don't want to come forward then plant a few people in the audience and have them come to the front, to make it look like people are responding and put more emotional pressure on the reluctant ones. Tell people that all they have to do to get saved is recite a certain phrase. Avoid talking about the cost of following Christ, and make no mention of repentance or a changed life. Keep it simple: people just need to come to the front of the church and pray a prayer, and then they're done." Even though churches follow those instructions as if they were a sacrament from God, you will not find them *anywhere* in the Bible. Instead Paul was simple and to the point: *preach the cross*. Preach the full gospel of God, because *that's* the mechanism God will use to save

people.

I find it fascinating that Christ routinely offended those who came to Him. For example, after attracting a very large crowd by miraculously feeding thousands of people with a very small meal, Jesus said this:

John 6:51-53: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you."

After Jesus preached that message, many of those who had been following Him left:

John 6:64-66: "But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father. From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him."

If the modern church had been in that situation it would have reacted very differently. First of all, the church would have had an altar call to bring as many people to the front as possible. They would have told the crowd that they could avoid Hell simply by reciting a prayer. They definitely would have avoided discussing any doctrines that might offend people! Once they

prayed that prayer and started attending church, they would preach messages that the new people would accept. After all, if you preach hard truths then there's a good chance the new people would leave, and who wants that? The modern church is extremely focused on numbers. The more people you can pack in the better – and the easiest way to do that is to water down the truth and make it acceptable to everyone. So that's what churches do.

But that's not what Christ did! He knew that many of those who were following Him didn't actually believe in Him at all, so He deliberately preached something hard in order to get the false converts to leave. He only wanted *genuine* converts, not phonies. He used hard doctrine to separate the wheat from the chaff. The modern church would never dream of doing that today. What God wants us to do, and what the church is actually doing, are two very different things.

Altar calls are a great tool if your goal is to maximize the number of people in your pews. However, if you're trying to create genuine Christians who will stand the test of time then they're a terrible thing to use – *especially* when used in the careless way in which so many churches use them. As we can see, Christ took a radically different approach!

Do you want to save people? Then preach the gospel to them. Make sure that people understand it – *all* of it. Preach the hard truths. Tell them that genuine conversions result in a changed life which bears the fruits of the Spirit. Those who believe will come to Christ and truly be saved – and those who don't will be offended and driven away. Offending people may seem like a bad thing to do, but it's *far* better than making them think they're saved when they actually aren't. After all, it's *much* easier for someone who knows that they're lost to come to Jesus, than someone who's convinced they were saved at the altar when they really weren't.

Modern Sermons Are Shallow

Sometimes when we're reading the Bible we come across passages that ought to startle us. The Bible says some pretty amazing things if we'll take the time to stop and think about what it's saying. All too often we simply read right over a passage without giving it any thought.

For example, after Nehemiah finished rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, he did something else of great importance: he teamed up with Ezra to read the entire Mosaic Law to the people. Just stop and think about that for a moment! Imagine reading the *entire* Mosaic Law at once. That's quite a task!

The reason he did that was because the people of Jerusalem weren't very familiar with it. The Jews had been committing all kinds of sins, and living lives that didn't please God. To solve that problem Nehemiah and Ezra taught the people what God's commandments actually were:

Nehemiah 8:2: "And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.

3 And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.

4 And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; ...

5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And

all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

7 ... and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place.

8 So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."

As you can see, the Levites put a lot of effort into this. They read the entire law of God, leaving nothing out. They read it distinctly so it could be understood. They also expounded upon the law so that people could understand what it actually meant. They wanted to make sure that everyone had heard the Mosaic Law and understood what it required.

Now, this was no small task. The Mosaic Law is much longer than just the 10 commandments; it contains a great many other rules as well. Anyone who has tried to read through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy knows just how many commandments there actually are. While it's true that much of Leviticus deals primarily with priestly matters and regulations regarding sacrifices, there are *still* a lot of commandments in those four books.

The process of reading the Law would obviously have taken more than just a few minutes. We can see in Nehemiah 8:3 that Ezra read "from morning to midday". In other words, this process took *hours*. This wasn't a 30-minute sermon! I'd also like to point out that this was *not* light reading material: after all, it was an exposition on the Mosaic Law. It didn't have any funny stories and it was *not* entertaining. If you've ever read those four books of the Bible then you know exactly what I'm talking about. That material is difficult, hard to read, and at times hard to

understand.

Yet how did the people respond? Well, we're told in Nehemiah 8:3 that even though this process took hours, all of the people listened attentively. In fact, they paid so much attention that they became convicted of their sins and began to weep:

Nehemiah 8:9: "And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law."

Not only did people pay attention for *hours* as the Levites expounded upon the *entire* Mosaic Law to them, but they also applied it to their lives and realized that they fell short! The people were so overcome by the magnitude of their sin that they began to weep. That's how much of an impact this had on them!

Do you know what would happen if someone tried something like this today? Imagine for a moment a pastor telling his congregation that he was going to spend the next 4 hours preaching a sermon on the entire Mosaic Law. If any pastor was foolish enough to try something like that, he would probably find himself out of a job. The congregation would bounce him right out of the pulpit and into the parking lot, and his days at that church would be over. There would be a riot!

The reason the congregation would riot is because modern Christians tend to have incredibly short attention spans when it comes to spiritual issues. Yes, the congregation will sit there while the pastor preaches a 30-minute sermon, but the odds are good they're not going to pay much attention to what he's saying. Instead of taking notes you'll find people balancing their checkbooks or just sleeping through the message. There are

a few people who will pay attention to it, but those are the exceptions. Many people will have already forgotten most of what he said by the time they get out to the parking lot. If the preacher dares to go over 30 minutes then people will start to complain. Even going over the allotted time by seven minutes is enough to get people upset. However, if the pastor's sermon is short – say he only talks for 20 minutes instead of 30 – then there will be rejoicing. People love short sermons and dislike long ones. This is true no matter how good the sermon is or how relevant it may be to their lives.

Why is this? The answer is pretty clear: people have a very limited appetite for preaching. Interestingly, I've never heard anyone complain that a service had too much singing. It's common for people to sit through an hour-long musical presentation at church without making a single complaint – but if the pastor ever tried to preach for an hour there would be a lot of unhappiness. The reason for this is simple: people like to listen to music, and they don't like to listen to preaching.

Now, I don't think it's *just* a problem of attention spans. After all, the same people who complain if a sermon goes five minutes over its expected time are willing to stay up until two in the morning if the baseball game they're watching goes into nine extra innings. They'll gladly watch a three-hour-long movie, or spend six solid hours watching reruns of television shows they've seen a dozen times before. When it comes to something *they actually care about*, time is no object. People who would riot at the thought of a four-hour sermon have no problem spending four hours watching a football game. It's easy to understand why: they believe that football is fun and exciting, and they believe that sermons (even really good ones) are kind of boring. People want to limit their intake of sermons.

I understand that there are some terrible preachers out there. I've heard pastors preach long sermons when they had nothing to say, and it was pretty painful. If your point can be

made in 10 minutes then make your point and stop. Don't stretch it out just to hear yourself talk.

But the problem that we have in our churches is not a dislike of *bad* sermons, but a dislike of sermons altogether. Many people who go to church have very little interest in hearing the Word of God preached (which goes back to the fact that congregations are composed of a "mixed multitude" of saved people and unsaved people). This is in stark contrast to the people we find in the Bible, who *did* care and who *did* pay attention.

As we can see in the example of Nehemiah, the people stood there for *hours* and listened. They cared about what was being said so much that they were overcome by conviction. They took the message to heart. King Josiah had the same reaction when the Mosaic Law was read to him:

2 Kings 22:8: "And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. . .

10 And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.

12 And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying,

13 Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words

of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us."

Here we have another instance where someone read the *entire* Law! In this case the Mosaic Law was read to King Josiah. What was the king's reaction? The Bible says he was so overcome that he rent his clothes. Not only did he pay attention, but he understood what the Law meant. He knew that his nation had been disobedient and was in danger of facing the wrath of God. Conviction had set in and he knew the nation was in a lot of trouble.

I realize these are exceptional cases. The Israelites didn't have the entire Law read to them on a regular basis – but when it was read, they listened. Have you ever tried to read the entire Mosaic Law in one sitting? I can't imagine any congregation allowing their pastor to read the whole thing to them in a single service; they would revolt. It simply wouldn't be tolerated. By modern standards that would be seen as a terrible sermon: dry, boring, and lacking amusing anecdotes. But when Shaphan the scribe read it to King Josiah, it had such a huge impact on him that it changed the course of the nation.

Do you know why? It's because Josiah cared deeply about honoring God with his life, whereas many people in our churches primarily care about being entertained. That's why Josiah eagerly listened to an hours-long recitation of hundreds of commands. His goal in life was *not* the pursuit of entertainment, but the pursuit of God. That's what he was passionate about.

Many people in our congregations primarily want to be entertained. If a sermon is fun then they will listen to it for a short time, but it had better be short or they will lose interest. Many Christians are focused on the pursuit of pleasure instead of the pursuit of God. This is why they have no patience for long messages. They have *lots* of attention for things that they care about, but God had better keep His messages short and fun.

Did you know that Joshua also read the entire Mosaic Law to the people? In fact, when he read the Law there were children present (as we discussed earlier in this series):

Joshua 8:34: "And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law.

35 There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them."

These children weren't sent off to children's church to get a more entertaining message. No, they had to behave and listen while Joshua spent *hours* reading the Law to them. That's pretty remarkable, isn't it?

This wasn't just an Old Testament thing. The apostle Paul also preached rather long sermons:

Acts 20:7: "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight."

Incidentally, his sermon didn't stop at midnight. He actually kept preaching until the following morning:

Acts 20:11: "When he therefore was come up again, and had broken bread, and eaten, and talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed."

Can you imagine what would happen if the apostle Paul came to one of our modern churches and tried to preach a sermon that lasted *until morning of the next day*? I suspect the congregation's reaction would *not* be pretty! Now, if people were watching a baseball game and it didn't finish until after midnight, then people will stay up for that because it's baseball. But a *sermon* lasting that long is completely out of the question. Didn't Paul care about those poor people in the audience?

I'm not saying that all of Paul's sermons were this long, and I'm also not suggesting that short sermons are evil. There's nothing wrong with preaching short messages, and in many cases that is very appropriate. If what you want to say can be said in just a few words then do that and don't drag it out! There's also the fact that (as we discussed earlier in this series) these sermons were probably interactive. The Levites who read the entire Mosaic Law to the people expounded on it. Things back then weren't like they are today, where people had to sit in silence. People were allowed to ask questions and get clarification. My point is that some of the sermons we find in the Bible were very long, and in spite of their great length they powerfully impacted the people who heard them. Yet if that same message was preached today the church would never tolerate it because of its length! Something has changed, and it's not the Word of God.

Do you know why Paul was able to preach to that group for so long? It's because they had a genuine heart for God and cared about what the apostle was saying. Christians used to care deeply about the things of God. For example, a 13th century Catholic Inquisitor by the name of Reinerius said this about the Waldensians:

"They can repeat *by heart*, in the vulgar tongue, the whole text of the New Testament and great part of the Old: and, adhering to the text alone,

they reject decretals and decrees with the sayings and expositions of the Saints" (Faber, p. 492).

These days many Christians haven't even bothered to *read* the entire Bible. Yet these 13th century Christians cared so much about the Word of God that they actually memorized *virtually the entire Book* – and this was during a time when owning a single page of the Bible could get them burned at the stake! Their passion for Bible study actually endangered their lives. Many of them were killed for it – and yet they weren't deterred. Even though owning a Bible was punishable by death, they still owned them, studied them, and memorized them. *That* is how much they cared!

Can you imagine these devoted Christians limiting sermons to 30 minutes and complaining if they went five minutes over? Can you imagine this group becoming irritated if the pastor spent a few minutes too long expounding on what the Word of God had to say? Of course not – it would be unthinkable to them. Things are different today, aren't they?

There is a preacher online who I enjoy listening to, who preaches sermons that are an hour and 45 minutes long. Since he has so much time he's able to go into incredible detail. What people don't realize is that if you only have 30 minutes to cover an entire passage then you're not going to be able to say very much about it. Imagine taking a 2-hour movie and cutting it down to half an hour. You're going to lose a lot when you do that! However, if you have more time then you can accomplish a lot more. Think of it this way: if you have to cover all 12 chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes in four 30-minute sessions then you are going to be extremely limited in how much you can bring out. More time would make a big difference – but Christians are unwilling to devote serious amounts of time to studying the Word of God. People claim that they simply don't have the time,

but I find that hard to believe. According to Nielsen, the average American watches *34 hours* of television a week. Why is it out of the question to sacrifice ten of those minutes to give the preacher a little more time?

The real problem is that many people in our churches find the Word of God boring. They just don't really care about it, and they have no passion for spiritual things. They have lots of time for secular things that they find entertaining, but they have no interest in reading their Bibles, or studying them, or tolerating a sermon that's longer than a half-hour TV sitcom. People are passionate about things, but God is not on that list. People praise God with their lips during the Sunday morning service, but their hearts are far from Him. It's easy to see where their heart truly lies: just look at where they spend their time!

If only people cared as much about the Bible as our forefathers did, how different things would be! Maybe then people wouldn't go around thinking that the Sermon on the Mount was preached by Billy Graham.

Churches Must Not Form Alliances With The Ungodly

In modern times it's common for Christian groups to join forces with non-Christian organizations in order to accomplish some social goal – be it protesting some injustice, or feeding the hungry, or whatever the hot topic of the day might be. Christians will join with Catholics, Muslims, Mormons, Jews, and whoever else they can find in order to accomplish their goals. The justification for this is that while we may have differences we can all agree on this one thing, so why not work together to accomplish it?

The answer is simple: it's because the Bible forbids it. Our generation has forgotten the principle of separation, and the

consequences have been devastating. The church needs to learn that ecumenicism – the idea that we should all get along and work together no matter what we believe – doesn't come from God. In fact, God is so opposed to it that He promised to curse those who are involved in such things.

I realize that's a strong statement, so let's look at the evidence. In 2 Chronicles 18 we can find the story of Jehoshaphat and Ahab. Jehoshaphat was a wise and godly king who the Lord gave great riches and honor. Ahab was an incredibly evil king who was married to the even-more-evil Jezebel. Despite their differences, Jehoshaphat thought it would be a good idea to join forces with Ahab and attack their common enemy:

2 Chronicles 18:1-3: "Now Jehoshaphat had riches and honour in abundance, and joined affinity with Ahab. And after certain years he went down to Ahab to Samaria. And Ahab killed sheep and oxen for him in abundance, and for the people that he had with him, and persuaded him to go up with him to Ramothgilead. And Ahab king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat king of Judah, Wilt thou go with me to Ramothgilead? And he answered him, I am as thou art, and my people as thy people; and we will be with thee in the war."

This is exactly the sort of thing that the modern church does. Jehoshaphat was good and Ahab was evil; Jehoshaphat worshiped the true God while Ahab worshiped pagan gods. Since they had a common enemy, Jehoshaphat thought it made sense for them to team up and work together. After all, the Syrians were dangerous and posed a threat to both kings. As the modern church would say, this is the Lord's battle, and if we can get unbelievers to join us in our fight then so much the better!

Except the battle did not go well. If you read chapter 18 you'll see that the prophet Micaiah warned against going to war at all, and prophesied that Ahab would be killed. Sure enough, Ahab actually was killed in that battle. When Jehoshaphat returned home, the prophet Jehu rebuked the king for joining forces with Ahab:

2 Chronicles 19:1-2: "And Jehoshaphat the king of Judah returned to his house in peace to Jerusalem. And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord."

The Lord was *not at all* pleased that Jehoshaphat had made an alliance with Ahab. Even though they had a common enemy, Jehoshaphat was forbidden from joining forces with the wicked. The Lord didn't see it as two people attacking a common problem; He saw it as helping the ungodly and aiding those who hate the Lord. What the Lord focused on was the fact that *Jehoshaphat helped Ahab*, a king who hated God. What Jehoshaphat helped him do was beside the point. The Lord was upset that he had helped Ahab *at all*. Because of this, as the prophet Jehu said, "therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord."

Some may wonder, didn't the Lord command us to pray for our enemies and do good to them that hate us? Yes, He did. But the Lord did *not* command us to *join forces with them and help them accomplish their goals*. That is an entirely different matter! That's what Jehoshaphat did, and the Lord was very upset about it. The fact that the Syrians were evil and were also Jehoshaphat's enemy didn't matter to God at all.

Let's look at another case. After Ahab died another king

arose named Ahaziah, who was also very wicked. Jehoshaphat thought it would be a good idea for the two of them to join forces and send some ships to Ophir to get gold (1 Kings 22:48). Once again we see a godly king teaming up with an evil king in order to accomplish something. Now, there was nothing wrong with going to Ophir for gold; King Solomon also sent ships out looking for treasure and acquired great wealth. Jehoshaphat thought that if both kings teamed up then they could both be enriched.

However, the Lord was not pleased:

2 Chronicles 20:35-37: "And after this did Jehoshaphat king of Judah join himself with Ahaziah king of Israel, who did very wickedly: And he joined himself with him to make ships to go to Tarshish: and they made the ships in Eziongaber. Then Eliezer the son of Dodavah of Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat, saying, Because thou hast joined thyself with Ahaziah, the Lord hath broken thy works. And the ships were broken, that they were not able to go to Tarshish."

What upset the Lord was *not* the purpose of the voyage. No, what really upset God was that Jehoshaphat had teamed up with the evil king Ahaziah. Because Jehoshaphat joined himself with a pagan king who hated God, the Lord destroyed the ships they had made. The Lord *hates* it when His people team up with His enemies in order to accomplish something. It doesn't matter if their stated goal is something that's actually good. *He hates it!* In fact, He hates it so much that He promises *wrath* on those who dare to do such things. In the example above, God was so upset at their partnership that He actually destroyed the ships.

This same principle is repeated in the New Testament:

II Corinthians 6:14-17: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."

People commonly apply this to marriage, but *Paul was not talking about marriage*. Marriage isn't even mentioned anywhere in the chapter! What Paul is saying is that Christians should *not join forces with pagans*. As Paul points out, light has no communion with darkness and righteousness has no fellowship with unrighteousness. They are *different teams entirely* and they are not to be "yoked together".

How many times did the apostles join forces with pagans in order to accomplish societal goals? *Zero times*. How many times did the church in the New Testament join with idol-worshippers to stamp out poverty, feed the hungry, or pursue some other goal? *Zero times*. Instead Paul condemns this practice – just as the practice was condemned in the Old Testament. God wants His people to be *separate* from the world. He doesn't want them building alliances with the wicked; instead He wants His followers to "come out from among them, and be ye separate".

This principle of separation is no longer followed by the modern church. It has ignored the clear teaching of 2 Corinthians

6:14-17. In fact, the church thinks it's *great* when they can team up with God-hating organizations in order to get things done! What God has to say about it is entirely forgotten – but God doesn't mince words about this:

2 John 1:10-11: "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds."

How does God say we should treat those who preach a false gospel? Does He say that we should join forces with them and try to find areas of commonality so we can build agreements? Nope. What He actually says is that we shouldn't even receive them into our home. In fact, we *shouldn't even bid them "godspeed"!*

Now, when John says "receive him not into your house" he's not forbidding us from sharing the gospel with them. What he *is* forbidding is helping them in any way, either in deed (by giving them a place to stay so they can keep preaching a false gospel) or in word (by bidding them godspeed). John is clear that those who help them, even verbally, become a "partaker of his evil deeds".

Sadly, this is a sin that the modern church *loves* to commit. I once saw a case where a church learned that a mosque was undergoing renovations, so they invited the Muslims to *borrow their church building* so they could keep worshiping their false god. That's exactly the sort of thing that John was condemning – but instead of being dismayed, churches brag about this sinful behavior as a great example of "outreach" and "building bridges" and "true love". God, however, calls it *being a partaker of their evil deeds* and hates it with a passion.

"Come out from among them, and be ye separate", says

the Lord. That is the commandment! God repeats it in Revelation and adds a threat:

Revelation 18:4: "And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues."

In this case the verse is talking about Babylon, the mother of harlots and abominations. God is commanding His people to come out of that wicked place and "be not partakers of her sins" – for those who *are* partakers of her sins will also partake of the plagues that God will send upon her. How do we become partakers of her sins? By joining forces with her and helping her in word or deed. We become partakers with the wicked when we refuse to separate ourselves from them.

The modern church has decided that it's not interested in separation, and instead eagerly tries to form alliances with as many God-hating organizations as it can possibly find. The church has no idea how much this angers God. The Lord didn't hesitate to discipline the righteous king Jehoshaphat when he committed this sin, and that is something we should take to heart.

The Importance Of Calling Out False Teachers By Name

Here's a question for you: is it right or is it wrong to call out false teachers by name? In the world today there are many people who call themselves Christian pastors who teach dangerous, heretical doctrines. Some of these teachers reject the Bible outright and claim that we need to look elsewhere for the truth. Others teach things that are contrary to the Bible or twist the Scriptures to their own ends. For example, there are pastors

who deny the virgin birth, the resurrection, the identity of Jesus as God, the reality of Hell, and that salvation comes only through Jesus – just to name a few common heresies! Such people abound in today's world and have led many astray.

The question is, what should be done about it? Some pastors teach that it's wrong to ever call anyone a false teacher. They say that calling someone a false teacher is the same thing as judging them, and Christians "aren't supposed to judge people." In their opinion the best thing to do is ignore them entirely. At most they might address the false teaching, but they never address the false teacher.

Others say that we should live by Thumper's motto. The rabbit from Bambi famously said that "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." I've heard people seriously suggest that this philosophy should guide everything we say. In other words, if we don't have anything nice to say about someone then it's best to keep silent. Calling someone a false teacher isn't nice, so we shouldn't say it. I'd like to point out that failing to deal with a situation is no different from ignoring it. The results are the same.

All of this brings up a question: what did people do about this problem in the Bible? Is this policy of ignoring false teachers actually Biblical? It's an excellent question, and fortunately it's easy to answer.

First of all, Jesus Himself made it quite plain where He stood. The Lord didn't hesitate to condemn false teachers in the strongest possible terms:

Matthew 23:27: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous

unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. ...

33 Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?"

As you can see, Jesus didn't mince words! He called the Pharisees hypocrites and a generation of vipers, and He did it *while they were standing there listening to Him*. There was nothing remotely "nice" about what He said! He actually told them, to their face, that they were very wicked men who were headed straight for Hell. The Lord *definitely* confronted both the false teaching *and* the false teacher.

Of course, Jesus was God, and that's an important distinction. Jesus has a right to judge everyone, and one day we will stand before Him and be held accountable for the way we've lived our life. God has every right to judge mankind, so the fact that He exercises that right shouldn't come as a surprise.

So let's look at another example. What did the apostles do when they were confronted with this sort of situation? Did they believe that confronting false teachers was wrong? Did they live by the "be nice at all costs" motto? Actually, they did not. For example, Paul had quite a bit to say about someone named Alexander:

I Timothy 1:19-20: "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme."

2 Timothy 4:14: "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works:"

These are remarkable statements! Not only did Paul call Alexander out by name as an evil person (which isn't a "nice" thing to say!), but he said that he *delivered him over to Satan*. Before you panic, I'd like to point out that the reason Paul did this was so that Alexander could learn not to blaspheme. Paul hoped that by doing this Alexander would come to regret what he'd done and would repent of his sins. However, Alexander apparently didn't learn anything because in 2 Timothy Paul once again mentioned Alexander's wickedness and asked God to avenge Paul for all the evil things Alexander had done do him.

We can see that the apostle Paul called out two false teachers by name (Hymenaeus and Alexander). Paul didn't restrain himself to just addressing the false teachings themselves, and he didn't say "Well, let's be nice about it." Paul never said anything remotely like "Even though some people are teaching false doctrines, it would be wrong and judgmental to call them out on it. We need to get along with such people and be nice to them." No, Paul was pretty direct in saying that Alexander was evil and people needed to be aware of who he was and what he was doing.

This is not the only example of this that we can find in the Bible! There are many more cases where the apostles called out someone for being a false teacher or an evildoer:

Galatians 2:11: "But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed."

2 Timothy 4:10: "For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia."

III John 1:9-10: "I wrote unto the church: but

Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church."

This isn't just limited to the New Testament; you can find the same thing in the Old Testament as well. For example, Nehemiah names quite a few names:

Nehemiah 13:7-8: "And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff to Tobiah out of the chamber."

Nehemiah 13:28-29: "And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites."

Another place where you can find this is in the Psalms. In fact, there's a whole class of psalms called imprecatory psalms, in which the psalmist asks God to avenge him for some evil that was done to him. For example, one psalmist wrote this:

Psalms 69:22-28: "Let their table become a snare before them: and that which should have

been for their welfare, let it become a trap. Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake. Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them. Let their habitation be desolate; and let none dwell in their tents. For they persecute him whom thou hast smitten; and they talk to the grief of those whom thou hast wounded. Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy righteousness. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous."

That's some pretty harsh language! Now, lest we think that these verses were simply the ravings of a godless lunatic, it's worth noting that we find the same sort of thing going on *in Heaven*. Take a look at what the book of Revelation has to say:

Revelation 6:9-10: "And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"

Revelation 11:16-18: "And the four and twenty elders, which sat before God on their seats, fell upon their faces, and worshipped God, Saying, We give thee thanks, O LORD God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned. And the nations were angry, and

thy wrath is come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldst give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great; and shouldst destroy them which destroy the earth."

Revelation 16:5-7: "And I heard the angel of the waters say, Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy. And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments."

I realize that we've strayed a little bit from the original topic, but there's an important point here. The modern church has been infiltrated with the idea that its primary role in life is to be *nice*. Calling out false teachers for heresy isn't nice, so many people say we shouldn't do it. Asking God for vengeance is *especially* not nice. The church believes that it needs to be nice at all times and never say anything that isn't positive and uplifting.

If you look at the Bible, however, it becomes obvious that this philosophy isn't the least bit Biblical. We aren't called to be nice; we're called to be loving, and that's an entirely different matter! There's nothing loving about refusing to tell people that sins are sinful. After all, the wages of sin is death! If you don't call out sin then you're allowing it to continue to claim one souls after another. Condemning it and urging people to repent of it is the only way to save them from its terrible consequences. We *must* call it out!

Likewise, there's nothing loving about refusing to

confront false teachers. Life isn't a game where everyone goes to the same place after death and receives the same meaningless prize. We are playing for keeps, and the reward is either everlasting life in paradise or everlasting torment in the Lake of Fire. There's no middle road or neutral ground! False teachers are denying everlasting life to millions of people and sending them down the road to Hell. They're like angry bears roaming around in crowded neighborhoods, looking for the weak and disabled so they can tear them limb from limb. If there was a rabid bear in your neighborhood you wouldn't ignore it on the grounds that we should be nice to bears; instead you would hide your children and then call animal control so they could capture the bear before it hurts anyone.

Refusing to name false teachers is devastating for many reasons. If no one confronts them then how will they learn that what they're doing is wrong? If no one names them then how will those who are weak or new to the faith find out that they should be avoided? There's nothing loving about refusing to warn people against people who teach that there's no Hell or judgment for sin. How many people are going to hear these false teachers and go away deceived because no one warned them? How many souls will be lost forever because those who knew better refused to do something about it?

The call to be loving means that sometimes we have to engage in behaviors that aren't very "nice". Paul really did turn Alexander over to Satan, but the reason he did it was in the hope that Alexander might learn the error of his ways and change. Would it really have been better if instead Paul had done nothing and let Alexander continue down the road to eternal damnation?

Now, I realize that the imprecatory Psalms are a bit different. The key there is to realize that while God forbids *us* from taking revenge, He does *not* rebuke our thirst for justice. What God says is that when we've been wronged we should allow the Lord to take care of it. Those who have been martyred

for the cause of Christ *do* thirst for justice to be done, as we saw in Revelation 6:9-10. The Lord doesn't rebuke this desire but instead promises that justice *will* be done. One day He will avenge His children, but that's a topic for another time.

Refusing to confront false teachers may be "nice", but there's nothing loving about it. I fear that our refusal to combat false teachings *and* those who teach them only makes it easier for false teachers to guide millions of people down the road to Hell. After all, if you refuse to tell campers that a vicious wolf is roaming their campground, what do you think is going to happen? Is being "nice" really worth all the souls that it's going to cost?

What "Worship" Actually Means

It's pretty universal for churches refer to their Sunday morning services as "Worship services". I have to ask, though: are they really *worship* services? I'm not convinced that the church actually understands what the word "worship" really means.

We can find the word "worship" many times throughout the Bible. For example, the wise men worshiped Jesus:

Matthew 2:11: "And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh."

Does this mean the wise men sang Jesus some songs and then listened to a sermon? Nope. It means they literally bowed

down to Him.

Here's a time when a leper came to Jesus:

Matthew 8:2: "And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean."

Did this leper sing a song to Jesus? No. He literally bowed down at His feet and then asked to be cured of his leprosy.

Here's a time when the disciples worshiped Jesus:

Matthew 14:31-33: "And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God."

Did the disciples sing to Jesus? No. They bowed down at His feet in awe and amazement.

I could give a *lot* more examples, but I think you get the point. The Bible is extremely consistent in the way it uses the word "worship". That word does *not* mean to sing songs! We already have a word for that, and it is the word "praise". The word "worship" means to bow down to God.

When people gather together and sing hymns, are they worshipping Jesus? No, they are praising Him. Worship and praise are not the same! We worship Jesus when we bow down before Him. We worship Him when we do His will instead of our own. You will never find a "worship service" mentioned anywhere in the Bible. There are many times when people gather together to praise the Lord or listen to a sermon, but worship is something that each individual must do by themselves. It's not a group

activity! You must make the choice to walk in His ways instead of your own. You must choose to submit to Him in your life instead of doing whatever you please. Those are acts of worship! What happens in Sunday morning services are acts of *praise*, which *is* a group activity.

It's very easy to praise God without worshiping Him. In fact, God said that people do this all the time:

Isaiah 29:13: "Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near to me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:"

Can you honor God with your lips while your heart is far from Him? Absolutely. I think that's very common in churches. Praise and worship are not the same thing, and churches shouldn't act like they're synonyms. If you come to church and sing a few praise songs, that doesn't mean that you've engaged in an act of worship. If you truly want to worship Jesus then you must submit to Him in your life and bow down to Him.

Churches should teach people what the word "worship" really means. We aren't doing people any favors by confusing the terms "worship" and "praise"! Churches do *not* have a "worship team". That whole concept doesn't even make sense! What churches have is a *praise* team. The fact that the word "worship" is so widely misused makes me think that people don't understand what worship is in the first place.

Should people praise God? Yes. Should people worship God? Yes. Are those two things the same? No, they are not.

Conclusion

If you've made it this far then it should be obvious by now why I think the modern church is very unbiblical. I'm not saying that the *doctrines* of churches are unbiblical (although that may be true as well, depending on what denomination we're talking about). I am saying that the way people "do church" is completely unbiblical. Christians often say that the Bible is their sole guide for faith and practice, and claim that they want to obey the Bible and not go beyond it – but when it comes to the way we run our churches, we've tossed the Bible out completely and have come up with all sorts of traditions that have no Biblical support and cannot be justified. Our ways are *not* better than God's ways. The way we have come up with to "do church" is extremely ineffective and has had terrible consequences.

Is there any Biblical support for having church buildings? Nope. But we have them anyway, and we spend millions of dollars on them, and we go deep into debt to pay for them, and we ask the congregation to make huge sacrifices in order to fund them. These buildings are always growing larger and larger, and taking more time and resources to maintain and repair. The buildings are a huge burden and have led to a lot of other problems, but we want them anyway. If we met in people's homes, like *every church we find in the New Testament*, we would solve a whole host of problems. But that's not what we do.

Is there any Biblical support for a pastor to have a congregation of ten thousand people? Absolutely not. The whole job of a pastor is to know his sheep, and help them, and go after them when they're in trouble – but it's possible to attend a large church for *months* without the pastor even noticing you're there. If you want help from the church you're going to have to get in touch with someone yourself and make an appointment, and then possibly pay a fee for counseling services. The pastor

doesn't know who you are and doesn't have time for you, and he isn't going to think about you when crafting his sermons. He has thousands of people that he's preaching to, and he can't possibly deal with each person individually and work alongside them. This wouldn't be a problem if people met in small groups in their homes, but that's not the way we do things.

Is there any Biblical support for pastors delivering every single sermon as a monologue that must never be interrupted with questions or corrections? Nope. Some sermons in the Bible were long and others were short, but people were allowed to ask questions. Paul even told people to judge those who were speaking and correct them if they were wrong. In the modern church a pastor picks a sermon and preaches it to 3000 people in the hope that somehow there might be something in it for someone. If we had small home churches then the messages could actually be directed at the problems people were struggling with. People could ask questions and get clarification. They could actually learn something, instead of being lectured and then sent home to work out any problems on their own.

Is there any Biblical support for services being exactly an hour or two long? Nope. In the Bible services were as long as they needed to be. People gathered together and then remained together until they were done. They prayed as long as needed, and preached as long as needed, and talked as long as needed. Sometimes the service only lasted a few minutes and sometimes it lasted all night. The length didn't really matter. Is that how we do things? Absolutely not. Our services are planned out in advance, right down to every song that will be sung and every prayer that will be prayed and the exact list of points the pastor will make in his sermon. The service will start exactly on time and end exactly on time (with very little variation). The service is going to be exactly the same regardless of who shows up that day or what their needs are. The number of people who come (or don't come) has no impact on how the service unfolds at all.

There's no Biblical support for that, and no church in the Bible ever operated that way, but that's the way we do things today.

I could go on and on and on. Is there Biblical support for tithing? No. Is there Biblical support for pastors marrying people? No. Is there Biblical support for meeting exactly once a week on Sunday mornings? No. Is there Biblical support for voting in pastors and voting them out? No. Is there Biblical support for having the entire congregation sit passively during the service? No. Is there Biblical support for pastors switching jobs again and again until they reach the peak of their career and land a prestigious position at a megachurch? No. Is there Biblical support for separating children from their parents once the service starts, and dividing people into different age groups so they can all be taught separately? No. Is there Biblical support for opening up church services to people who aren't Christians at all, and never having any services or events that are only for believers? Nope. There's not even any Biblical support for calling part of the church building "the sanctuary" and designating it as a holy place (which is how many people view it). The building isn't "the church"! The *people* are the church. God doesn't dwell in the building; instead the Holy Spirit dwells within us. The sanctuary is not holy! Instead it is the *people* who are holy.

Yes, this land is full of buildings that are called churches. They have pastors that don't know the people who attend the services, because there are so many people attending that the pastor can't possibly get to know them. You can go into these buildings and attend the services, but you can't expect people to know when you're in trouble because it doesn't work that way. The pastor is probably not going to come looking for you if something bad happens, but if you fill out a form and schedule an appointment then maybe you can get some counseling (although you may be charged for it). You can hear sermons in these buildings, but the sermons aren't designed with you in mind and may have nothing to do with what's going on in your

life. If you've been going to church for a while then all the sermons will probably be things you've heard before. If you've been going a long time then you could probably give the sermon yourself because you already know all the points that are going to be made. You're essentially stuck in first grade forever because the pastor will never explore the Bible on a deeper level. He can't, because his church is full of people who aren't saved or who don't really care very much about Christianity.

If you go to a church service, you will be able to say hello to the person who has been sitting behind you for the past three years – but that will probably be the extent of your conversation. You will sing whatever songs you are told to sing, and you will pray whatever you are told to pray. If there's a responsive reading then you will say whatever the pastor wants you to say. You can give when the offering plate is passed around, and nearly all your money will go toward paying for the building and the salaries of the staff (some of whom may make significantly more money than you do). You can then sit quietly while the pastor preaches at you. Once the service is over and you've finally left the building you can then pray your own prayers and sing your own praises to God. You can study the Bible and have friends over and build relationships with them. You can talk to someone about your problems and help them with theirs. You can bear one another's burdens – but you're going to be doing it outside of the very expensive church building, because that's not what that building is for.

I've heard it said that fewer people go to church these days than they did in the past. What amazes me is that anyone goes to church at all! Why would you want to drive across town in order to sit passively for a few hours and then drive back home? How does that benefit anyone? If you go to a small group then you can help others and be helped in return, but you have no options to do anything in a church service. If you miss church for a month it won't negatively impact the service at all, because

there's nothing for you to do in the service but sit there quietly.

That might not be so bad if there was Biblical support for the way we conduct our services, *but there isn't*. In the Bible, services were held by small groups of people who met in homes. Christians talked to one another, and asked questions, and corrected one another, and helped one another. They noticed when there were problems and they went after the lost. They met frequently (on a daily basis, actually), they shared meals together all the time, and they were actively involved in each other's lives.

Are there congregations that manage to get to know each other and become close to one another in spite of all this? Sure – but that is happening *in spite* of the way they conduct their services, not because of them. The service is designed to keep everyone passive, and it does a really good job of that. The only thing people are asked to do is stand when they're told to stand, sit when they're told to sit, sing when they are told to sing, and be quiet when they're told to be quiet. You don't have to do anything in a service at all! In fact, you *can't*. The paid staff will handle it all for you. Your presence at the service is not going to make it better, and your absence will not make it worse. (Was that true in New Testament churches? Definitely not. But that's exactly how our services are designed to work.)

Is there Biblical support for that model? Nope – not even close. So why are churches structured this way? *Because that's what people want*. The modern church is governed by the congregation. They have the power to vote in deacons, elders, and pastors, and to vote them right back out again. If the people didn't like the way things were being done then they could change it – but they don't. The truth is that the modern church has a lot of aspects that appeal to the flesh. After all, no one is going to expect anything from you and you're not going to be asked to do anything. The services are going to be kept short, and you will know exactly when you're going to be leaving. You

don't have to establish close relationships with anyone or open up about your problems. You can keep living in sin all you want, and the chances are no one around you will even notice. The sermons are never going to challenge you, which means you don't have to worry about studying the Bible and making sure you know what's going on. All of the work will be done by other people, which gives you the freedom to sit there quietly and vegetate. You're also not going to be held accountable for anything! If the church does somehow get a pastor who's a real firebrand, they can just vote him out and replace him. The church will carefully insulate you from anything unpleasant and make sure you don't hear anything that you don't want to hear. If you don't have a passion for God and want to remain in your sins then the modern church is a dream come true.

It's also a great system for pastors. They get a large building, and a large ministry, and a large staff, and lot of resources to play with. I realize there are a lot of small churches that claim to not have very much money, but even "small" churches often have budgets of *hundreds of thousands of dollars per year* (which is probably *far more* than the budget of anyone in the congregation). Besides, there's always the dream of "striking it big" – and if a pastor realizes that his church isn't going to grow then he can just jump ship to a bigger one. No pastor is going to want to have a small house church when he could have a multi-million-dollar complex with a large full-time staff! There's no prestige in a small house church at all. No one is going to be impressed by a congregation of 15 people. It's true that small class sizes are *enormously* beneficial for *the people who are actually in those classes*, but I think it's safe to say that spiritual growth is pretty far down on the list of priorities for most churches. (I know that seems harsh, so here's a question for you. Which do you think is more helpful for spiritual growth: allowing questions during a service, or refusing them? Even *schools* allow students to ask questions, because it's so obvious

that it helps people understand the material – but not churches. What does that tell you about our priorities?)

The modern church is exactly the way that people want it to be. The problem is that *it's not the way God wants it to be*. The Lord has given us a pattern to follow in His Word, and He expects us to follow it. He's told us exactly how He wants the church to operate. Jesus has also told us what He will do if the church ignores Him and does whatever they want instead:

Revelation 2:4-5: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."

What did Jesus say He would do if the church didn't repent? He said He would remove it from His presence and cast it aside. Oh, the building might remain and the people might still show up, but from God's perspective it would no longer be a church at all. It would just be a group of people who were wasting their time doing things that God hated.

God commands us to walk in His ways. When are we going to stop and think about what we're doing and compare it to what the Bible has to say? If our traditions and ways of doing things have no Biblical basis then shouldn't we do something about that? Why are we fighting so hard to keep our church buildings when, honestly, we probably shouldn't have them in the first place? Why are we fighting so hard to make sure a church service is attended by 1500 people, when those people would be far better served if they were in a small group of only 15 people? Are we *really* serving God? Do we truly have the best interests of the congregation at heart?

I realize we have a lot of impressive buildings. There was once a time when the disciples tried to show Jesus how impressive Herod's temple was. Do you know what He had to say about that magnificent building which, at the time, was one of the greatest structures in the world?

Mark 13:1-2: "And as he went out of the temple, one of his disciples saith unto him, Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here! And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

Do you think that God would have used the Romans to tear that temple apart stone from stone if that building was pleasing in His sight and a true house of prayer? I'm pretty sure the answer is *no*. God tore that temple apart because it was a den of thieves.

There may come a day when the government comes against our church buildings and tears them down. If that happens, I have to ask: is it possible that God is allowing the government to shut down the church because it stopped pleasing Him a long time ago? If our churches were firmly based on the Bible then that would be one thing – but are they? There are many people today who are fighting to preserve their church buildings. Wouldn't it be better to go back to the Bible and do things God's way instead?

Resource 1: Chapter Summary

Philemon

Philemon 1

- PAUL AND TIMOTHY, TO PHILEMON
- PAUL TALKS TO PHILEMON ABOUT HIS RUNAWAY SLAVE ONESIMUS, WHO PAUL HAS "BEGOTTEN IN MY BONDS"
- PAUL WANTED TO KEEP HIM, BUT INSTEAD HE IS RETURNING HIM TO PHILEMON AND URGES HIM TO RECEIVE ONESIMUS AS IF HE WERE PAUL HIMSELF; IF HE HAS WRONGED PHILEMON THEN PAUL WILL REPAY IT
- PAUL SAYS HE KNOWS PHILEMON WILL DO MORE THAN HE ASKS AND REQUESTS THAT HE PREPARE A LODGING FOR HIM, FOR HE TRUSTS THAT THROUGH THEIR PRAYERS HE WILL BE SENT TO THEM

Resource 3: The Teachings Of The Bible

Philemon 1

- The letter to Philemon was written by Paul and Timothy (v1)
- Paul referred to Timothy as his brother; it is Biblical to refer to other Christians as brothers and sisters, for we are all part of the family of God (v1)
- When Paul wrote this letter he was a prisoner (but the letter does not say that Timothy was a prisoner as well) (v1)
- Paul wrote this letter to Philemon (v1)
- Paul called Philemon "dearly beloved"; he did not think it was inappropriate to be affectionate in his letters, and it was not viewed as sexual or inappropriate (v1)
- Paul called Philemon a "fellowlabourer" (v1)
- In Paul's introduction he referred to himself as a prisoner, not an apostle; he was emphasizing the fact that he lacked freedom (just like the slave Onesimus) (v1)
- In Paul's introduction he referred to "Jesus Christ", or Jesus the Messiah (v1)
- The reason Paul was in prison was because of his faithfulness to Jesus Christ (v1)
- Paul's faithfulness to Jesus Christ cost him a great deal,

and did not benefit him in a worldly or material sense (v1)

- Apphia is a female name; she may have been Philemon's wife, but since she is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible there is no way to know for sure (v2)
- Paul did not think it was inappropriate to call fellow believers "beloved", regardless of their gender; affection was not viewed as inappropriate or sexual (v2)
- Archippus is mentioned in the book of Philemon and in Colossians 4:17; in Colossians Paul referred to the ministry that Archippus had been given from the Lord, and was commanded to fulfill it; nothing else is known about him (v2)
- Paul calls Archippus a "fellow soldier" (v2)
- Paul did not think that military metaphors were unbiblical, pagan, or inappropriate (v2)
- There was a church which was meeting in Philemon's house (v2)
- In the apostolic era churches met in people's homes; they did not meet in church buildings (v2)
- There is no mention of church buildings anywhere in the New Testament, nor are there any commands to build such things or meet in them (v2)
- The pattern we find in the Bible is churches meeting in small groups in people's homes (v2)
- There is nothing wrong or inappropriate with churches meeting in homes instead of in dedicated church buildings (v2)

- No book of the New Testament ever implied that when a church meets in a home it is a sign of poverty, and churches should instead strive to have their own building (v2)
- Paul began his letter by greeting people and encouraging them (v2)
- Paul prayed that Philemon would have both grace and peace (v3)
- Paul did not pray that Philemon would suffer and have pain (v3)
- Grace and peace comes from God the Father and God the Son (v3)
- Paul called Jesus the Messiah (the "Christ") (v3)
- Paul called Jesus "Lord"; we are to submit to His commands and obey them (v3)
- Jesus is our Lord and has complete authority over us, and those who deny that are denying what the Bible clearly teaches (v3)
- Paul regularly prayed for Philemon (v4)
- It is Biblical to pray for others (v4)
- It is Biblical to repeatedly pray for others, and to make regular mention of them in our prayers (v4)
- Paul gave God the praise for Philemon's love and faith; the apostle believed that God was the author and source of it (v4, v5)
- It is Biblical to pray (v4)
- Even though Paul was in prison he still cared about the

health and wellbeing of others, and he still tried to reach out to them with encouragement and support (v4)

- Paul prayed for others while he was suffering in prison (v4)
- Philemon had love for Jesus (v5)
- Philemon had love for all of the saints; later in his letter Paul would identify Onesimus as one of the saints (v5)
- Philemon had faith in Jesus (v5)
- Paul put value on having love toward the saints (v5)
- Paul put value on having both love and faith toward Jesus (v5)
- Paul had heard other people testify of Philemon's love and faith (v5)
- It is good to testify of the love and faith of others (v5)
- Paul wanted Philemon to effectively communicate the faith that he had in Jesus (v6)
- Every good thing which was in Philemon was because of Jesus Christ, who had transformed him and saved him and put those good things there (v6)
- Our faith cannot be effectively communicated if we do not acknowledge and understand that any good thing which is within us is the result of Jesus (v6)
- We must give Jesus all of the credit and praise for every good thing in our life; it is not our doing, but His (v6)
- Jesus is the one who transformed us and who put good things in us (just as Jesus transformed Onesimus, who Paul will bring up later in his letter) (v6)

- Paul took great joy in the love that Philemon had for Jesus and for all of the saints (which Paul would later ask Philemon to apply to Onesimus) (v7)
- In ancient times the "bowels" were seen as the seat of emotions (whereas today the culture refers to the "heart") (v7)
- Philemon refreshed the saints and encouraged and strengthened them; later in this letter Paul will ask Philemon to do this again by freeing Onesimus (v7)
- Paul referred to Philemon as his brother in Christ (v7)
- Paul took the time to greet and encourage Philemon, and make sure Philemon knew that Paul was praying for him, before getting to the point that he wanted to address (v7)
- Paul chose to take a very gentle approach to asking Philemon to set Onesimus free; he could have condemned Philemon, railed against him, and used his apostolic authority to force the matter, but instead Paul entreated him as a brother (v8)
- It would have been convenient for Paul to just use his authority to demand Philemon do what he wanted, but he chose to take a more gentle and loving approach instead; in doing so Paul set an example of how to handle confrontations in the church (v8)
- Paul wanted Philemon to know that he had deliberately chosen to take a gentle approach over this issue (v8)
- The reason Paul chose to be gentle with Philemon was out of love, not fear (v9)
- Paul referred to himself as "the aged" (v9)

- Not only was Paul old, but he was also a prisoner (v9)
- The reason Paul was a prisoner was because of his relationship with Jesus (v9)
- Paul twice emphasized the fact that he was a prisoner, before mentioning Onesimus - Philemon's slave, who also lacked freedom (v9)
- Paul met Onesimus while he was in prison (although it seems that Onesimus himself was not in prison) (v10)
- When Paul met Onesimus he did not turn him over to the Roman authorities, as the law of the time required; instead he wrote this letter to Philemon (v10)
- Paul refers to Onesimus as someone he had "begotten in my bonds"; it seems that Paul played a role in the salvation of Onesimus even though Paul was in prison at the time (v10)
- Paul referred to Onesimus as his son, indicating that Paul had a very close relationship with him and cared about him a great deal (v10)
- Paul did not think it was inappropriate to refer to people he had "begotten" in Christ as his children (v10)
- While Paul was suffering in prison for the sake of the gospel, he took the time to write a letter on behalf of Onesimus - someone who was not in prison (v10)
- When Onesimus was the slave of Philemon he had not been a profitable slave, but instead had caused Philemon trouble (v11)
- Onesimus was a changed man now that he had been saved, and he was now useful for both Philemon and Paul

(v11)

- Paul was benefiting from his relationship with Onesimus (v11)
- Onesimus was able to help Paul, who was in prison for the sake of the gospel (v11)
- Paul did not turn Onesimus over to the Roman authorities; instead Paul sent him back to Philemon with this letter (v12)
- Paul made it clear to Philemon that the apostle loved Onesimus like a son, and he wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus the way Philemon would receive a son of Paul (v12)
- Paul sent Onesimus back, but with the clear expectation that Philemon would set him free and return him to Paul (v12)
- Paul did not condemn Philemon or Onesimus in this letter, but instead took a loving and gentle approach to asking Philemon to do the right thing (v12)
- Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him so that he could serve the apostle while he was in prison (v13)
- Paul once again mentioned the fact that the reason he was a prisoner was for the sake of the gospel, and Onesimus was helping him; the implication is that if Philemon did not do as Paul asked then he would be depriving the apostle of help that he urgently needed while he was suffering in prison as an old man (v13)
- Paul was very gentle but he made it very difficult for Philemon to tell him no (v13)

- Paul said that the service that Onesimus was providing to Paul was considered to be done on behalf of Philemon; in other words, Paul was giving Philemon the credit for what Onesimus was doing for him (v13)
- When we cannot attend to someone's needs, but send someone else in our stead and make it possible for them to do the work, it is counted on our behalf (v13)
- Paul could have simply used his apostolic authority to keep Onesimus, but instead he sent him back to Philemon and asked Philemon to free him; Paul did this even though losing Onesimus would negatively impact his ability to spread the gospel (v14)
- It would have been far more convenient for Paul to simply take what he wanted, since he had the authority to do so, but instead he inconvenienced himself while he was in prison in order to show love and respect toward Philemon (who was not in prison) (v14)
- Paul wanted Philemon to return Onesimus willingly, not because Paul kept him and didn't give Philemon a choice (v14)
- God wants us to give willingly, not because we are forced to and we do not have a choice (v14)
- Paul did not take the pragmatic approach that "it's for the sake of the gospel, so that justifies whatever I need to do" (v14)
- Paul showed respect and love to others even when it cost him a great deal to do so (v14)
- Onesimus had fled from Philemon (v15)
- Paul told Philemon that perhaps the reason Onesimus left

was so that he could meet Paul, become saved, and then return as a beloved brother in Christ instead of an unprofitable servant (v15)

- There may be times when we go through trials in our life that will ultimately lead to greater blessings, and a better situation than if the trial had never happened (v15)
- There is an everlasting component to the relationships that Christians have with one another (v15)
- Paul wanted Philemon to look at Onesimus as a beloved brother, and not a runaway slave (v16)
- Paul told Philemon that he viewed Onesimus as a beloved brother in Christ (v16)
- Paul did not think it was inappropriate to refer to other Christians as "beloved" (v16)
- Paul told Philemon that he should have an even greater love for Onesimus than the apostle did (v16)
- Paul told Philemon to treat Onesimus the way that he would treat the apostle himself (v17)
- Paul, the great apostle who wrote much of the New Testament and who God used to do miraculous things, and who planted churches all throughout the world, asked Philemon to consider him to be a fellow partner in the gospel; Paul was showing incredible humility here, since the acts of Philemon were very small compared to the acts and suffering of Paul (v17)
- Paul is taking great pains to make sure that Onesimus is well received (v17)
- Paul said that if Onesimus had done anything wrong or

owed him any money, Philemon should charge those things to Paul (much like our sins are put on the account of Christ, who suffered on our behalf) (v18)

- Paul was willing to take on the wrongdoing and debt of Onesimus, a runaway slave (v18)
- Paul did not deny that Onesimus had done anything wrong to Philemon; instead he told Philemon that he was willing to pay that debt (just as Christ paid our debts) (v18)
- Paul was willing to take on the debts of others while he was a prisoner; he was willing to suffer on behalf of others at the very time he was already suffering greatly for the sake of the gospel (v18)
- Paul personally wrote a letter to Philemon promising to pay any debt that Onesimus owed; Paul made that promise while he was in prison (v19)
- Paul wrote this letter with his own hand, to make sure Philemon understood he was making a binding promise and would keep his word (v19)
- Paul said that he would repay the debts of Onesimus in spite of the enormous debt that Philemon owed to Paul (thus reminding him of what Jesus said: "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors") (v19)
- Paul's promise to repay Philemon for any wrong that Onesimus had done made it impossible for Philemon to punish Onesimus (v19)
- Paul once again referred to Philemon as his brother in Christ (v20)
- Paul told Philemon that if he granted Paul's request it

would bring him great joy while he suffered in prison (v20)

- Paul made it clear to Philemon that by doing this he would greatly help the apostle Paul through a very difficult and trying time (v20)
- When we see others walking faithfully in the Lord and doing what is right, it should bring us joy (v20)
- Paul was confident that Philemon would be obedient to the Lord and would do what was right (v21)
- Paul told Philemon that he was confident Philemon would go above and beyond what the apostle asked; Paul fully expected Philemon to return Onesimus to him (v21)
- Paul was loving and gentle, but he was also very clear about what he wanted, and he wrote this letter in a way that made it impossible for Philemon to refuse (v21)
- This letter is an example of what it means for a church to be characterized by love, even in conflicts (v21)
- Paul was in prison but he expected to be released and have the opportunity to visit Philemon (v22)
- Paul was reminding Philemon that one day he intended to visit Philemon and see him and his church again; one day the person who wrote this letter would be there in person to see him (v22)
- Paul expected Philemon to be praying both for his release from prison, and that Paul would have the opportunity to visit him (v22)
- Paul valued visiting churches in person (v22)
- Paul believed that God answered prayers, including

prayers of deliverance (v22)

- Paul expected Philemon to want to see him, and to have a place ready for him if he came to visit Philemon's household (v22)
- At the time this letter was written Epaphras was also in prison for the sake of Jesus; Epaphras is also mentioned in Colossians 1:7 and 4:12 as a faithful servant of Christ who labored fervently for the church (v23)
- Epaphras, a prisoner who was suffering on behalf of Jesus, sent his greetings to Philemon (v23)
- Marcus sent his greetings to Philemon; Colossians 4:10 identifies him as the son of Barnabas' sister (v24)
- Aristarchus sent his greetings to Philemon; Colossians 4:10 calls him a fellow prisoner; Acts 19:29 refers to him as a man of Macedonia and one of Paul's travel companions (v24)
- Demas sent his greetings to Philemon; in 2 Timothy 4:10 we find out that Demas forsook Paul right before the apostle was martyred, for Demas loved this present world (v24)
- Lucas sent his greetings to Philemon; he isn't mentioned elsewhere in the Bible (v24)
- At this time Demas was considered to be a fellow laborer, but eventually Demas revealed his true nature when he forsook Paul (v24)
- Paul saw value in including the greetings from others in his letters; Paul wanted Philemon to know that these other people were thinking about him (v24)

- Paul was not alone when he was in prison; at this time he had the support of Epaphras, Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, and Lucas (v24)
- Grace comes from the Lord Jesus (v25)
- Paul asked that the grace of Jesus would be with the spirit of Philemon (v25)
- People have spirits (v25)
- The spirit which is within us can receive grace from the Lord Jesus and benefit from it (v25)
- Paul ends the letter with "Amen" (let it be) (v25)

[Last updated 7/31/2022]