

# The Church: God's New People

*Timothy Savage*

*The Gospel Coalition Booklets*

Edited by **D. A. Carson & Timothy Keller**

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*Timothy Savage*

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It is the most strategic body of people on the face of the planet. Through its ministries, vast tracts of humanity are rescued from evil and lifted from despair. And by its voice, new life is proclaimed to entire civilizations. It is an association of people that pulsates with the glory of God. What human gathering could possibly warrant such accolades? Only one qualifies: the church of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Few Christians are aware of the explosive nature of the church to which they belong. Several years ago when transporting the English churchman John Stott to the place where he was preaching, I asked him what he thought was the most neglected doctrine among contemporary Christians. Supposing he would say, “theology” (our view of God is too small), or possibly, “soteriology” (our methods of salvation are too self-reliant), I was surprised to hear him reply without hesitation “ecclesiology.” To me, the doctrine of the church seemed peripheral to other more weighty doctrines and certainly not worthy of the stature my interlocutor ascribed to it. But in the years since, after reflection on the biblical teaching of the church, I have come to see otherwise. The church of Jesus Christ is the locus of God’s plan for creation.

## The Church and God’s Agenda

According to the Bible, God is executing a plan of cosmic dimensions. He is in the process of reclaiming all things for his glory. Writing to believers in Ephesus, the apostle Paul makes a stunning observation: God is “summing up all things—things in the heavens and things on earth—under one head, namely, Christ” (Eph. 1:10). Precisely where this comprehensive “summation” is taking place Paul makes clear a few verses later: “God has given Christ as head over all things *to the church*” (Eph. 1:22).

Remarkably, the church is ground zero in God’s ambitious reclamation project. It is home base for the execution of God’s work in the world, the place where “all things” are being drawn together under



Christ. If we want to see what God is doing on this planet—and who would want to miss something so spectacular?—we must look to the church. Here, and only here, we find a people drawn together and filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 1:23; 3:19).

The link between Christ and the church is nearly seamless. The church is the body of Christ, and Christ is its head (Col. 1:18). The church reverberates with the resurrection power of Christ himself (Eph. 1:19–20). It personifies his love (Eph. 5:2). It manifests his fullness (Col. 2:9–10). It is a “new man” measuring up to the full stature of Christ himself (Eph. 4:13). And yet the church is also distinguished from Christ. It is his bride (Eph. 5:25–27). It is the one he nurtures and cherishes as his own flesh (Eph. 5:29). It is the repository of the Father’s wisdom (Eph. 3:10). It is where God receives all glory (Eph. 3:21). It is a beacon of divine light, a foretaste of heavenly glory (Eph. 1:18).

### *God’s People as a Family*

Perhaps the best way to envisage the church—accounting for both its organic link to Christ and its distinctiveness from Christ—is as a family related by blood. Members of the church are “blood relatives.” They share the same Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its name (Eph. 3:14). They share the same elder brother, Christ (Heb. 2:17), whose blood shed on the cross has reconciled them to the heavenly Father (Col. 1:20). And they share a fraternity with their spiritual siblings, brothers and sisters in Christ (Col. 1:2), who are reconciled to each other by the same blood of the cross (Eph. 2:13).

*It is especially as a family that the church forms the centerpiece of God’s work in creation.* This should not be surprising, because God has always worked through families. Right from the beginning he formulated his agenda in terms of a family. It will be enormously helpful as we seek to understand the unique and powerful role of the church to venture back into primordial history and look at the very first family, the family of Adam and Eve, and to notice how their union serves as a picture of what would later become the church of Jesus Christ.

### *The Inaugural Family*

The drama of the sixth day of creation never ceases to amaze us. It was then that God fashioned his *magnum opus*, a human being, and bequeathed to him a magnificent garden paradise. The new creature

apparently lacked for nothing. He was the beneficiary of a priceless bounty from the hand of a loving Creator. Yet, surprisingly, there was a deficiency. Something was “not good.” The solitary man lacked a “helper,” someone who corresponded to him (Gen. 2:18). By himself he was but one piece of a two-piece puzzle, and the adjoining piece was nowhere in sight. Not only was he bereft of the comforts of companionship, but far more importantly he was unable to fulfill his purpose in creation.

Man was created to bear the image of God, to manifest the likeness of his Maker (Gen. 1:26). Such a tall order could not be accomplished in isolation. So when God fashioned man, he created him “male and female” (Gen. 1:27). In other words, he constructed man as a family, subject to the interpersonal relations inherent within every family. The relational component of the divine likeness is hardly surprising given the fact that God himself is a family of triune relations—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To manifest the divine image thus requires at least a duality of persons. Man needs help for his lofty calling. He needs a family.

The first family was given an exalted mandate. No sooner had God invested Adam and Eve with his image than he issued the following injunction: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). What sounds like a recipe for overpopulation is actually a prescription for ecological blessing. By calling for the multiplication of families, God intends to saturate the planet with relational units manifesting his image, so that every nook and cranny of creation will be subdued by the presence of his likeness. Under the sovereign decree of an all-wise God, the family is the vehicle by which his triune likeness will be disseminated to the four corners of the earth.

### *God's People, God's Image, and Christ*

But this begs the question, “What aspect of the divine likeness are families meant to disseminate?” Or more to the point, “What is the actual nature of God's image?” Down through the ages questions like these have prompted much speculation, because in the near context of Genesis (as well as in the more distant context of the entire Old Testament) little light is shed on the nature of God's image. For this reason, the rabbis who labored between the Testaments came up with their own ideas and proceeded to link the divine image to the glory of God. To manifest God's image is to reflect his glory. Since the interpre-

tation was not divinely inspired, it may seem irrelevant to us today, except for the fact that one of those rabbis, a Pharisee who converted to Christianity, authored epistles in which he reiterated the link between God's image and God's glory. And those epistles, the letters of the apostle Paul, were inspired! In them Paul breaks new ground and identifies an even more strategic link: a connection between God's image and the glory of Jesus Christ.

According to Paul, we see perfectly in Christ the image and the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). The nature of the divine image is thus no longer a matter of speculation: we need only look at the divine glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). The paragraph in Paul's writings where the image probably receives its sharpest definition is found in the famous hymn of Philippians 2. Here, in an expanded translation, we read:

Because Christ existed in the form of God [a term nearly synonymous with the image of God], he did not regard his lofty status as an opportunity for self-aggrandizement but rather as a calling to do just the opposite: to empty himself, to humble himself, to take on the form of a slave, and to submit to a slave's death, even the unthinkably repellent death of a cross! (Phil. 2:6-8)

From the unspeakable riches of equality with God to the most impoverished death in antiquity, from heights unsearchable to depths unimaginable, from one polar extreme to another, this is the measure of the self-emptying death of Christ. It is history's most perfect expression of sacrificial love. And, according to Paul, it is also the clearest revelation of what it means to manifest the image of God. In Jesus we see the likeness of the heavenly Father. On the cross we behold a picture of what God is like, and hence of what families created in his image are meant to be like. It is a picture of infinite love.

### *God's People, God's Image, and Love*

The portrait is consonant with what we know of God elsewhere in Scripture. "God is love," says the apostle John (1 John 4:8, 16). And his love is unlike anything on earth, far above the superficial, conditional, sentimental love that reigns among postmodern devotees of the term. Divine love is supernatural love, the kind of love of which only the Lord and those who bear his image are capable. It is a "greater" love

(John 15:13), a love that is prepared to lay down its life (1 John 3:16), to absorb into its very constitution the life of another (Luke 10:25–37), and to give up everything to redeem the existence of others (Mark 10:45). Moreover, it is precisely the love passed back and forth among members of the Godhead. The Father loves the Son (John 17:26), the Son loves the Father (John 15:9), and the Holy Spirit glorifies the Father and the Son (John 14:26).

Many writers have identified this other-directed love as the distinguishing feature of the Godhead. “God’s very being is love, which subsists eternally and necessarily between the several persons in the Godhead.”<sup>2</sup> The “tri-personal” God manifests “infinite love in relationship.”<sup>3</sup> “Self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the Trinitarian life of God.”<sup>4</sup> The “picture of God” is of one “whose love, even before creation of anything, is other-oriented.”<sup>5</sup>

What is perhaps most striking about God’s love, and what is certainly most pertinent to our understanding of the church, is that the Lord wants to share his love with us, not only by making us the objects of that love but also by equipping us to share that love with others. By creating us in his image, he has fitted us to reproduce the inter-relational love of the Trinitarian family, passing back and forth among members of our families the love that reverberates within the holy Godhead.

When we fulfill our vocation, when love-dispensing families fan out across the globe, we subdue the planet by a kind of husbandry that prospers the world and all it contains. By the far-flung migrations of families reflecting the self-giving image of God, creation erupts in a song of impassioned thanksgiving to its Maker.

### *God’s People, God’s Image, and Sin*

But there is a problem. The people of God have not been faithful to the mandate they have been given. Rather than manifest self-giving love, they are self-grasping. “The woman saw . . . the tree . . . and *took* of its fruit . . . and she also gave some to her husband” (Gen. 3:6). And tragically the first family’s sin has become every family’s downfall. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Far from spreading the glory of his image throughout the entire earth, families have pursued their own glory and inflicted a terrible darkness upon the planet. Indeed, every earthly ill can be traced to this single Adamic

defect. All relational division—whether interpersonal abuse, racial strife, or international discord—stems from the failure to embody the glory of God’s love.

Our examination of the people of God would grind to an abrupt halt were it not for the fact that God’s love for sinners is stronger than his condemnation of sin. To be sure, the heavenly Father abominates sin. It represents a personal affront. It diminishes his glory in the world and effaces the radiance of men and women created in his image. What good father would not be enraged by the degradation of his children? And who could blame such a father if, in his wrath, he simply abandoned his offspring to the consequences of their rebellion—indeed, relinquished families to the cancer of their self-centeredness?

## Rescue of God’s People

Yet, astonishingly, our heavenly Father conceives a rescue-plan for humanity. He elects one family out of a multitude of families and enjoins this chosen people to shine once again the glory of his image into the world. First, it is the family of Noah that, preserved from the flood, is called to multiply and to fill the whole earth (Gen. 9:1). Sadly, Noah and his progeny fall into the very sin that ruined Adam and Eve.

So God chooses another family, this time headed by the patriarch Abraham, and commissions his offspring to be the ones through whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). But this family, too, falls into sin, reducing the glory and the image of God to a mere flicker of their original intent. Time and again God graciously rejuvenates his people, raising up new versions of the nation of Israel and calling them to fidelity to his covenant and the manifestation of his character throughout the world. But repeatedly—albeit with rare instances of success—Israel fails to live up to its calling.

Clearly, the family of God is incapable of fulfilling the divine mandate. It is defective at the core of its being. At root, it is not God-glorifying. At heart, it is self-promoting. Because of its internal hardness, Israel is the opposite of what God intended his people to be.

The failure of his chosen people did not take God by surprise, nor did it undermine his plan for creation. By far the biggest part of the plan was still to come, and the Old Testament provides tantalizing clues of its ultimate unveiling. God will make “a new covenant with the family of Israel” in which the defect of sin is eradicated. “I will put my law with

them, writing it on their hearts" (Jer. 31:31–33). "I will give you a new heart . . . my Spirit I will put within you" (Ezek. 36:26–27).

By his Spirit, God will perform cardio surgery, implanting a new impulse within human hearts, an internal law that the apostle Paul identifies as the law of love: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:14). It is an astonishing promise. From time immemorial it was God's intention to carve out a new family whose hearts would be purged of the defect of sin and filled with the law of love, an impulse empowered by the indwelling Spirit of God himself. Creation eagerly awaits the emergence of this family!

### *A New People Foretold*

The prophet Isaiah anticipates this re-created family. He identifies the new "Israel" as the servant of the Lord, who (in words reminiscent of Genesis) will be "a light to the nations so that my salvation reaches to the ends of the earth" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). Exactly when this family will arrive Isaiah never fully reveals, but he does offer important clues. A child will be born (Isa. 9:6–7), and this child will become a servant who will endure unspeakable suffering (Isa. 52:13–53:12).

At this point, the clues become more difficult to decipher. Sometimes the servant is identified with the family of God (Isa. 41:8) and sometimes with an individual (Isa. 49:6–7). How the servant (out of whose suffering a new humanity presumably will arrive) can be both a collection of people and an individual is left to the reader to ponder. But with the passing of centuries all becomes clear: in a tiny town in a backwater province at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, a child is born. "In the fullness of time, God sent forth his son" (Gal. 4:4).

### *Christ and the People of God*

This son—whose name is Jesus, whose calling is messiah, whose title is Lord—would fulfill the eternal plan prophesied by Isaiah. The apostle Paul exults to give definition to the plan: "The mystery hidden for ages has now been revealed—namely, Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:26–27). Here at last is the arrival of the indwelling presence of God signaled by the prophets, the glory of God's image inscribed on human hearts, the displacement of sin by the internal law of love. Christ, whose own self-emptying death on the cross represented the

quintessential expression of divine love, now comes to reside in us. The supernatural love of God can, because of the indwelling presence of Christ, be perfected in our hearts (1 John 4:12).

### *The Body of Christ: Personal and Corporate*

Because of our focus on the nature and role of the church, it is absolutely essential to acknowledge that the indwelling love of Christ is bestowed within a plurality of human hearts. When the apostle Paul etches the definitive words on parchment—"Christ in you, the hope of glory"—he signals (using the plural pronoun "you") that it is a blessing conferred on a collection of people.

This is not to suggest that Christ does not indwell hearts individually. He most certainly does, but not hearts isolated from other hearts. Ultimately, it is a family of hearts that Christ comes to indwell (2 Cor. 4:6). Where on earth do we find such a love-filled family? The Scriptures make it clear: it is within the body whose head is Jesus Christ; it is within the church that bears his name.

We are at last in a position to comprehend the full wonder of this holy community. But before we draw out several implications, it is important to reckon with a vital point: while membership in the church is freely granted, it is not an automatic accomplishment. It is something won only at great cost. In our natural state, we are shot through by sin and entirely unfit for the indwelling presence of the Lord. On the cross, in an act of self-sacrifice quantum leaps beyond anything ever seen in human history, Christ canceled the debt of our sin and credited his righteousness to our account (Col. 2:13–14; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Not only that, but he also broke the bonds of sin by being the first human ever to pass his entire life without grasping for his own glory, even to the point of submitting willingly to the ignominies of death on a cross (1 John 3:5). By vanquishing our sin in these two respects—paying sin's penalty and purging sin's power—Christ fits us for membership in his holy community. Costly to him and priceless to us is our induction into the body of Christ.

Too often we think of the cross only in terms of its application to individuals. Because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, single human beings can be saved from the wrath of God and assured seats in a heavenly eternity. While these realities are not to be diminished in any way but rather prized with full-throated praise, to limit the fruit of Christ's work

to the salvation of single hearts is to read the Bible through the individualistic lens of our day. Everyone who is reconciled personally by the fleshly body of Christ is installed within the corporate body of Christ. "In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). And it is above all within this corporate body, within the people of God newly reconstituted in and by Christ, that the larger dimensions of God's plans for creation receive breathtaking definition.

### *The Body of Christ: Local and Universal*

The church of Jesus Christ is a very big body, nothing short of the worldwide community of believers in Christ. In other words, it's a universal church. But—and here is a critical distinction—the universal church is only as strong as its local manifestations are viable. It is especially at the level of the local assembly that the drama of God's plan for creation is being fleshed out. That is why the apostle Paul prays specifically for the local churches in Galatia and Ephesus, visits the local churches in Corinth and Philippi, and writes to the local churches in Rome and Thessalonica—epistles we often interpret personally in the privacy of our personal Bible readings but the content of which was directed in the first instance to edify entire communities of people called local churches.

There is genius in the corporate dimension of God's plan. The world itself is nothing more or less than an assortment of human relationships, most of which are broken, rent apart by discord and strife, ruined ultimately by the self-grasping of sin. Disunity reigns on every level, from small-scale relational units such as marriages (where nearly half of all unions in North America end in divorce) to large-scale units such as nations (where presently almost forty wars are being waged internationally) to everything in between (where lines of conflict cut deeply between genders, races, political parties, generations, sexual preferences, and a list of other relationships that could be multiplied almost indefinitely). The fracture and division within relational units is our world's most besetting darkness.

### **Unity in the Church**

But it is a darkness that the local church is peculiarly equipped to dispel. A striking unity pervades the family of God. Relationships that were once fractured have been supernaturally mended. Even Jews and



Gentiles, ethnicities renowned for mutual animosity, have come together in one body. How? They “have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13). They have been “reconciled to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Eph. 2:16). Christ has dealt a mortal blow to the divisiveness of sin, to the social plagues of egotism and pride, and thus broken down walls of separation and brought together in one humanity a new household in which “the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple of the Lord . . . a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:15, 19–22).

God, through Christ, is actually making his abode in this freshly minted family. This is a good thing because, with his self-emptying love indwelling the collective hearts of this holy humanity, binding its members more and more firmly together, the newly united family serves as a beacon of hope to the fractured families of the world. Through local churches, as they multiply and fill the earth, the unifying glory of Christ becomes visible to the ruptured relationships of the planet.

### *Spiritual Gifts*

It is important to appreciate exactly how the love of God works out in practice. Remarkably, every person reborn in Christ arrives in the local church with a supernatural bequest from a gracious God, a gift of the Holy Spirit, a special and unique talent. It could be the gift of service or teaching or faith or administration or any number of other gifts (for lists see Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:7–10).

No gift should ever be played down; each represents a mammoth benefaction, allocated “according to the measure of Christ’s own gift” (Eph. 4:7), and each is dynamically effective, “empowered by one and the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:11). God strategically distributes the gifts among his people, insuring that local churches are vested with the resources necessary to thrive for his glory; he arranges “the members of the body, each one of them, just as he desires” (1 Cor. 12:18).

Here is the most important thing to understand about spiritual gifts: they are given by the Holy Spirit in order to be given away, to be lavished on other members of the body for the growth of the body, “for the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). When every member of the local church gives away his or her gift, when each person is investing spiritually in others, the result is absolutely stunning: mem-

bers of the church are bound together in a glorious union. “The whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16). Indeed!

When people lavish their gifts on other members of the body, they draw others into a nearly seamless constitution with themselves. Pouring themselves out, they draw others in. The laws of physics would appear to be violated (who ever heard of an outward thrust creating a seamless union?) and yet it makes perfect sense. When each member of the body engages in an outpouring of service, all members become increasingly united, so much so that they actually begin to resemble Christ himself.

Indeed, what is being passed back and forth among them is precisely the love of Christ that indwells them. Characterized by multiple expressions of his cruciform love, the local church attains “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13) and “[grows] up in every way into him who is the head, even into Christ” (Eph. 4:15). To look at this body of people is to behold—in a very real sense—the Lord Jesus himself.

### *The Power of the Church*

The power of this spectacle can scarcely be overstated. It is like nuclear fusion. Atoms are among the tiniest and most unnoticed wonders of nature, but when two of these diminutive structures fuse together, an enormously powerful reaction is created. When several of these fused atoms are in turn fused with other atoms, something even greater is engendered: an explosion of thermonuclear energy capable of turning on the lights of entire cities.

How can such a tiny and seemingly insignificant atom produce such arresting displays of power? In my younger days, I would ponder this very question while surfing offshore from the nuclear power station at San Onofre, California. While waiting for a good wave, I would gaze at its immense dome and marvel at the thousands of utility pylons arranged like a well-ordered army prepared to convey massive quantities of energy from particles so small they were invisible to the naked eye. It was a mind-boggling spectacle.

Yet the energy of nuclear fusion is insignificant compared to the power welling up within a local church. When members of the local

church pour out the love of Christ into each other, a dramatic series of “explosions” takes place, reaction upon reaction, enough energy not just to electrify cities of neon lights and microwave ovens, but, more importantly, to bring spiritual light to a world dying in darkness. To the eyes of the bedraggled citizens of the world, mired in discord and division, the love of the local church could scarcely be a more revitalizing image. It will cause many to raise a voice of praise in honor of the Source of this love (Matt. 5:16).

### *Love and the Church*

For this reason, the exhortation of the apostle Paul to local churches never varies: “Put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14); “Owe nothing to one another except to love each other, for the one who loves has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8); “So now faith, hope and love remain, these three, but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13); “Through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:13–14); “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another” (1 Thess. 3:12).

A similar call is issued by the apostle John: “This is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (1 John 3:11); “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God” (1 John 4:7). So also the apostle Peter: “Above all, keep on loving one another” (1 Pet. 4:8). These exhortations doubtless find a source in the words of Jesus himself: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Love is the *sine qua non* of the family of God.

Examples of how this love works out in practice are ubiquitous in the apostolic canon: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2); “Look out for the interests of others, having in you the mind that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:4–5); “Always seek to do good to one another” (1 Thess. 5:15); “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another” (Eph. 4:32); “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, living in harmony with one another” (Rom. 12:15–16). Additional examples could be multiplied almost indefinitely since there is no limit to the ways in which a local church manifests something as boundless as Christ’s love. It’s a love that surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:19).

There are no human words to capture the strategic importance of this love. The local church and its love represent the only sure antidote to a postmodern world mired in sin and despair. People today are trying to put one foot in front of the other and sustain a meaningful existence but are consistently sinking into the quicksand of uncertainty and confusion. Looking for friendships, they absorb wounds of the soul. Craving companionship, they become mired in loneliness. Seeking assurance, they are riddled by self-doubt. Yearning for security, they are wracked by anxiety.

People are weary, marooned in darkness with little real contentment, and yet they trudge onward seeking solace in anything that might distract them from their empty lives—a screen, a beer, a dalliance. When these, too, fail, desperation sets in and they begin to wish—begin to pray—that a cry might be raised by someone farther up the trail who can draw their attention to something beautiful, something substantial, something transcendent—anything that might banish despair and ignite hope.

There is something that proclaims just such deliverance. It is something so radiant that it actually transforms its surroundings. It is the body of Christ. To catch a glimpse of the local church, the local church in action, whose members interact lovingly with each other, pouring out their God-given gifts into each other's lives, showcasing in their relentless self-sacrifice the cruciform love of Jesus Christ himself, is to witness more light by exponents than secular minds can begin to absorb. It is to see what society lacks, a love without which souls wither and die, a love for which all people (whether they know it or not) passionately crave. It is the love found exclusively in the local church.

### *The Uncompromising Church*

This brings us to an absolutely vital question. Will the local church fulfill its purpose and shine like a radiant light against the darkness? Also, will it take pains to guard its position as a repository of triune love? It is hardly surprising that Paul pleads with brothers and sisters in Christ to nurture their love and maintain unity at all costs:

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full

accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 2:1–5)

So much is riding on the unity of the local church. It must be preserved with utmost vigilance.

We can be grateful that the local church is not left to itself in this endeavor. The Lord himself is a reliable guide in the matter of ecclesiastical sanctification. In his sovereignty, he ushers his people into the unexpected experiences of suffering, because through suffering he can purge the pride that so readily foments disunity. In other words, he engenders humility (without which there can be no true love) by introducing afflictions in many ways like those experienced by Christ himself.

He asks his people to “carry about in their bodies the dying of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10) and to “fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col. 1:24). By becoming increasingly “like [Christ] in his death” (Phil. 3:10), by persevering through the same sort of ostracism and rejection that the Lord himself endured (2 Cor. 13:4)—a not unexpected consequence of manifesting a love so antithetical to the egotism of the world that it poses a mortal threat to the world and its ways—members are prepared to “manifest in their bodies the life of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10). They are prepared to become conduits of resurrection life to more and more people, causing the “thanksgiving of many to increase to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:15). Suffering, when authored by the hand of a sovereign God, works paradoxically to engender love and to encourage a radiant witness in the world (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

## **The Church and Outreach**

While the local church must guard the unity within, it must also showcase the unity without. In other words, the new people of God must avoid insularity. It is part and parcel of God’s cosmic plan to use this family to placard his glory before secular eyes. “Through you I will vindicate my holiness before the nations . . . declares the Lord God” (Ezek. 36:23). But even churches endorsing the call to radiate the light outwardly can stumble in their witness. They can seek to impress and

draw in outsiders on worldly terms, adjusting styles of worship, manners of dress, and even content of sermons to cater to worldly tastes.

The approach is fundamentally flawed. When local churches attempt to give people what they want, they are at cross-purposes with the gospel of Christ. At some point they will have to come clean, reverse course, and jolt their auditors by the revelation that true followers of Christ actually die to their wants—they deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34–35). It is doubtful whether many churches can bring themselves to unsay the things they have used to lure people in the first place.

### *The Gospel of Christ as a Foil to the World*

The local church must remember that it is most useful to the world when it is most different from the world. Nor must it try to be different. It just needs to be itself—a radiant beacon of the selfless love of Christ. And by being itself, it actually loves the world. What could be more loving in an age lost in the mists of subjectivity than to preach the truth of God's Word and the unvarnished gospel of Jesus Christ? What could be more loving in a world mired in despair and saddled with sad songs than to erupt in the unbridled joy of genuine Christian worship and Christ-exalting songs? What could be more loving in a day when people grope in vain for a love that will nurture their souls than to inundate newcomers with a compassion resembling that found in the cross of Christ? The local church loves the world best when it most clearly embodies what the world does not have.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a great preacher of the last century, issued a strong challenge to the church of his day:

We seem to have a real horror of being different. Hence all our attempts and endeavours to popularise the church and make it appeal to people. . . . [But] the world expects the Christian to be different and looks to him for something different, and therein it shows an insight into life that regular church-goers often lack. . . . If [a person] feels at home in any church without believing in Christ as personal Saviour, then that church is no church at all, but a place of entertainment or a social club.<sup>6</sup>

The local church must rise up and be the local church, a body of people committed to preaching the undiluted gospel of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the gospel must form the center of all a church is and does. For Paul that means two things: preaching Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as servants because of Jesus (2 Cor. 4:5). Neither emphasis would have appealed to the self-seeking world of Greco-Roman antiquity, nor would either emphasis have won much support as a strategy for drawing in the lost. Yet Paul does not flinch. His preaching is unswerving.

Interestingly, only here does Paul use the verb for preaching with more than one object, one denoting verbal content (Christ Jesus as Lord) and the other denoting behavior (ourselves as your servants). Central to Paul's *kerygma* is the proclamation both that Jesus is Lord and that he, Paul, is a servant. When we follow Paul's lead and preach in this way, and when (as a result) local churches become servants in their world as Paul was in his—or better yet as Christ was in his (Mark 10:35–45)—then our preaching will be not only more fully orbled but also more gratefully received.

### *Bringing the World to Christ*

Any local church that serves in its world as Christ served in his exhibits a twofold thrust: it seeks to bring the world to Christ, and it seeks to bring Christ to the world. One of the best ways of bringing the world to Christ is to invite the world into the gatherings of the local church. "I have been delighted," commented the preacher Charles Spurgeon, "as I have noticed the earnest efforts of many of my church-members in seeking to bring sinners to the Tabernacle to hear the gospel."<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, this is not a fashionable idea among contemporary church strategists who argue that we must in contrast meet the world on its own turf—over coffee during work breaks, after hours in the sports bar, in the neighborhood walking the dogs.

While few would deny that penetrating the world's domicile is vital to the witness of the local church, we miss a strategic opportunity when we fail to invite the world into our home, where the family of God assembles to worship Christ, where members listen to the gospel of Christ faithfully preached and carefully applied, where people minister to each other through radical expressions of Christ-shaped love, where in a corner of this troubled world a family is actually functioning in accordance with the image of the triune family of God. Amid the ubiquity of broken relationships and dysfunctional families, where

else will people see a better way to be human than among the family of God? We must invite the world into our churches.

Underscoring this point, Paul draws our attention to the fact that the organism called the local church is at root a kaleidoscope of relational units. He groups the members of the ecclesiastical body into pairs: husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees (Eph. 5:22–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1). It is immediately noticeable that each pair represents one of the three fundamental building blocks of society. But the significance of these pairs derives not from their presence in every society but from their presence in God's society.

For Paul, the local church is the world's fundamental social gathering and as such is meant to serve as a model to the pairs of the world. In its interpersonal relations, and especially in the ecclesial relations of couples in marriage, in family, and in business, the local church provides paradigms for similar relationships in the world outside (see again Eph. 5:22–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1). By mirroring the glory of Christ's love, each pair reveals to the world a better way to live in relation. How will the world see the better way (and then hopefully respond to what it sees by trusting for its own salvation in the finished work of Christ) unless it is invited into the assemblies of the local church?

### *Bringing Christ to the World*

There is a second thrust in the strategy of the local church: bringing Christ to the world. Every local church ought passionately to pursue corporate ministries (i.e., ministries representing not just the isolated forays of individual members but the collaborative efforts of the entire body) within its city, ministering to both neighbors and even enemies, seeking to improve the living conditions of those who need it most and to create conditions in which human lives can thrive in the ways God intended at creation. In other words, the local church should embrace the mission of bringing God's love to the city. It is a mission spelled out not only in the Old Testament (Isa. 58:6–10) but also in the New Testament (Matt. 25:34–40) and embodied preeminently in the teaching and ministry of Jesus.

The parable of the good Samaritan is a case in point. We reproduce the love of Christ when we pick up the broken lives of people right in front of us, bearing them on our own backs as though their brokenness were our own. And we will continue to bear up such lives until they



are no longer broken—“binding up wounds, pouring on oil and wine, carrying to an inn, paying out whatever is required, showing mercy, proving to be a true neighbor” (Luke 10:34–37). To love your neighbor as yourself is not merely to love another as much as you love yourself, but to take up the life of another and make it your own. In every city, local churches ought to be the best neighbors. “We must love men and women to Jesus.”<sup>8</sup>

In the early days of the Christian era, two devastating epidemics swept the Roman Empire. Even the wisest physicians were at a loss to prescribe antidotes for these plagues, and many of them, including the famous classical doctor Galen, fled the cities for the relative safety of the countryside. There was one notable exception—members of local churches:

Most of the Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves but thinking only of others. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life, drawing onto themselves the very sickness of their neighbors, cheerfully accepting their pains.<sup>9</sup>

Unbelievers noted the vicarious sacrifice of Christians: “Look how they love one another!”<sup>10</sup> As members of modern churches, it is our privilege to dignify this sacred legacy, thinking strategically and praying earnestly about how we might collectively bring the love of Christ to the needy of our cities, how we might become counter-cultural by living out within our culture the glory of the image of Christ.

### *A Bit of Heaven on Earth*

As we learn from Genesis, the image of God was meant to permeate the earth. As we learn from Christ, it is an image revealed preeminently in the self-giving love of the cross. When that love penetrates the hearts of a body of people—a possibility only for those who have, through the work of the cross, been cleansed of sin and declared in the right—when that love takes up an abode in the family of God, in the church of Jesus Christ, and when expressions of that love mark out the interpersonal relations of local churches in the same manner as they epitomize relations within the triune family of God, the glory of heaven begins to break out on earth.

The new covenant people of God will, while still walking on earth, obtain a foothold in the heavenly Jerusalem. Their eyes will be alive to the riches of their glorious inheritance (Eph. 1:18). And the nations will come to the celestial light of this holy family, famished as they are for the unity of relationships not fractured by egocentrism, for a body summed up under one head, for a people radiating the image of divine love, for a church manifesting the cruciform love of the triune God (Isa. 60:1–11).

### *The Imperfect Church*

How can a local church be sustained in such a glorious vocation? First, it will be sustained only imperfectly. Although the love of this body shines like a radiant beacon against the darkest night, it will never emit more than the initial rays of heaven's glory. The body of Christ is not yet perfectly aligned under its head. Rancor and division, indeed sin, still invade its relationships. But when the body of Christ falls short of the glory of God (sometimes falling so low it can only look up), it will, secondly, lift its eyes to Jesus Christ and, beholding the glory of the Lord, be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to the next, from a dimmer manifestation of self-giving love to a brighter one (2 Cor. 3:18).

### *Fixed on Christ*

The local church must never take its eyes off Christ. It must set its mind on the things of heaven where Christ is seated (Col. 3:1–2). It must eagerly await a Savior who, when he comes again, will transform its lowly body into perfect conformity with his body of glory (Phil. 3:20–21). When at last we shall see him—no longer through a glass darkly but in the clarity of undiluted light—we shall know fully the love that for so long surpassed our comprehension. Then, and only then, shall we perfectly reflect the image of Christ (1 John 3:2–3).

Until that time, the local church fixates on Jesus Christ. In its preaching, Christ is upheld. In its worship, Christ is extolled. In its ordinances—baptism and the Lord's Supper—Christ is celebrated. Indeed, whoever is baptized is baptized into Christ, and specifically into his death (Rom. 6:3), and whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup proclaims the death of the Lord until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). In

the discipline of its members, the humility of the Passover Lamb serves as the guiding impulse (1 Cor. 5:7).

Everything comes back to Christ; every member is riveted to its head. Christ binds everyone and everything (Col. 1:17–18). No wonder a great champion of the local church, Charles Spurgeon, resolutely affirmed his dependence on Christ: “I would have no wish to be here without my Lord; and if the gospel be not true, I should bless God to annihilate me this instant, for I would not care to live if you could destroy the name of Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

The vocation of the local church could scarcely be more exalted. Called out of the world to be a light in the world, to be a united family among the disunited families of earth, to be indwelt by Christ himself, to be the apple of God’s eye, to be graven on Christ’s hands, to be the glory of the image of the Holy Trinity, to be an embodiment of the infinite love of the cross, to be a collective portrait more beautiful than any other in the world—that is the church, the local church, the new people of God.

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## Notes

1. This paper represents an exposition of the eleventh point, "God's New People," of the Founding Documents of The Gospel Coalition.
2. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 467.
3. Timothy Keller, *Gospel Christianity* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2003), 22.
4. Cornelius Plantinga, as quoted by Keller in *Gospel Christianity*, 16.
5. D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 44.
6. Iain H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years 1899–1939* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 141–42.
7. C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography: 2: The Full Harvest* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 246.
8. C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 344.
9. Dionysius, quoted by Eusebius in *Eusebius: The History of the Church*, trans. G. A. Williamson (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1965), 7.22.
10. Tertullian, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), *Apology* 39.
11. C. H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Pasadena: Pilgrim, 1855), 1:208–9.



## The Gospel Coalition

**T**he Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historic beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we are troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we are distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historic faith. We not only hear of these influences; we see their effects. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists regarding the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. What replaces the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth working itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of kingdom calling and sacrifice. We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current- and next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that is zealous to honor Christ and multiply his disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission



is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all of our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. We intend to do this through the ordinary means of his grace: prayer, the ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing the confession and vision set out here, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

*“The vocation of the local church could scarcely be more exalted. Called out of the world to be a light in the world, to be a united family among the disunited families of earth, to be indwelt by Christ himself, to be the apple of God’s eye, to be graven on Christ’s hands, to be the glory of the image of the Holy Trinity, to be an embodiment of the infinite love of the cross, to be a collective portrait more beautiful than any other in the world—that is the church, the local church, the new people of God.”*

—From the booklet

These Gospel Coalition booklets are edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller and are designed to offer thoughtful explanations of the ministry’s confessional statement. The Gospel Coalition is an evangelical movement dedicated to the gospel of Christ and a Scripture-based reformation of ministry practices.

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