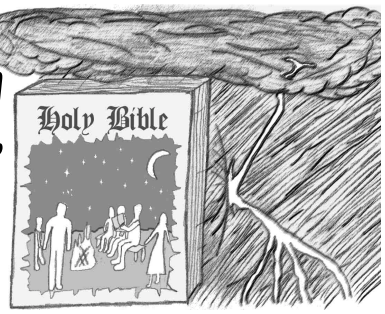
Shelter in the Word



He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty
You are my refuge and shield: I have put my hope in your Word. ***—Psalm 91:1; 119:114***

Vol. 3, No. 5 Helping you become self-sufficient in the Word—for a lasting relationship with the Almighty **Sept/Oct 2000**

What Should a Local Congregation be Like?

by Morris C. Kerry, Jr.

Our last issue contained an article about Christians participating in secular government. In the Old Testament, God gave His instruction on how to love Him, how to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18) and also His plans for a national government. The New Testament does not contain any instruction for forming national governments, but greatly expands upon man's relationship with God and his fellow man.

The New Testament speaks of forming churches—assemblies of believers who meet together regularly. However, it says nothing about building church buildings, doctrinal statements, membership lists, clergy and laity, church bureaucracy and many other things that most people think necessary for a church.

It took many centuries for these things to develop, but they are a part of most churches today. The New Testament churches seemed primarily centered around living a personal life guided by Christ with rather informal organization.

The established religious denominations of today in many ways are much more similar to the established religious organizations of Jesus' day: the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, etc. While their doctrines may be different, their methods of operation are similar—they are all largely centered on their organization's leadership, power, doctrine, membership, etc.

The author of this article, now deceased, spent several decades of his life working and serving in a variety of ways in church groups both large and small. He was respected as a "man of God" by most who knew him, but continually sought not to attract attention to himself, pointing people to Christ and the Bible.

This article summarizes many of the things he learned in those years. If you are involved in the leadership of a congregation, these principles should be valuable in helping you do a better job. If you are simply looking for a congregation to attend, look for one that uses many of these methods (realizing that no group will be perfect). *—NSE*

A church should be for the Spiritual purpose which God has made clear. It is a congregation of believers who are searching and trying to put together an understanding of His **will** in their lives as they live them. It is to be able to carry out the most wonderful commission of Jesus Christ, why He came, and what He has shared with us, in order to bring us into a oneness with the Father.

The intent of ministry should be to help persons help themselves. Some are by circumstance dependent: the retarded, the senile, and the mentally ill, for example. But most people can become independent. Many needy people have little sense of personal worth and they feel unwanted and useless. Consequently they often act in a repulsive, irresponsible way. Such people need to be helped to develop a feeling of personal worth and self-responsibility.

If a church promises more than it can fulfill, the result will be disillusionment. If it initiates more than it can do, frustration and resentment will develop. A church should strain its resources to do all it can, but refuse to overextend itself. Since most churches face more need than they possibly meet, determining priorities is highly important.

Focus on people more than program design. Prepare for difficulties, be flexible, be positive, maintain good relationships, avoid a one sided approach, demonstrate that the ministry aids spiritual growth.

Reason is the essential and distinguishing power of man, even with all its limitations and its dangers.

Also In This Issue:

11 Women and Their Struggle for Identity

(Letters and our other departments will return next issue.)

The right to knowledge cannot be exercised for all the people by any single group or preserved in any one institution. The duty of every individual in acquiring and using his knowledge is to make very sure that in doing so he does not injure the welfare of mankind. Knowledge is not intended to be a vehicle to control others.

Thinking, learning, remembering, knowing, imagining and creating new ideas; preserving and communicating knowledge over distances in time and space is our privilege. Not only is it wonderful in its compass and variety, it is unique and makes us human.

Today, a great deception has settled over the minds of many people concerning the "body of Christ."

They refer to "the body" not as a spiritual organism, made up of the scattered, far-flung believers here and there who are directly tied to Jesus Christ Himself personally, but in their minds "the body" is the collective number of individuals who have specific loyalties to specific human organizations! If you are followers of just one man and the hierarchy or organization he represents, then you are in the body, they reason. Thus they have ignorantly supplanted the spiritual organism for a physical organization; they have exchanged the truth of God for an analogy.

But an analogy is not necessarily the truth; it only serves to help us understand the truth!

Many believe they have access to salvation only through a man and/or through a fallible organization. People begin to believe their very salvation depends on whether they remain joined to one man or group. Even in-home fellowships are not immune to this trap.

But only through Jesus do we have access to the one Spirit unto the Father. Jesus still retains His leadership, just as in the past.

The leading principle of the church was and still is to believe that the Holy Scriptures contain the things necessary to our salvation (2Tim 3:16). With this principle in our heart and mind it will expel superstition and idolatry. Therein, we worship one God, through the one Mediator, and by the influence of one Spirit.

People and Spiritual Power

There are many worthwhile objectives that could be considered by churches today, but two deserve priority consideration. They are people and spiritual power.

Winning people to Christ is the primary objective of the church, and it is the fundamental task given by Jesus in the "Great Commission":

> Mat 28:19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
>
> 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

But there is much confusion in this title. We sometimes divide the Great Commission into winning and teaching, but this is a false division of responsibilities. The Great Commission focuses upon people who are to be led into a personal faith in Christ, which will result in a life of obedience, service, and eternal salvation.

We need organization, methods and techniques to reach people in this sense, but let us be certain that we do not come to view these functions as our objectives, rather than the people. Let us focus our attention upon people. The people who are lost; people who are hopelessly caught in sin; people who are burdened with sorrow and misery; young people who stand at the crossroads of life; old people who look back at life and

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have no hope for a better future; children with whole new lives before them. Jesus Christ is our "Peace"(Eph 2:14), and we are to be "Peace Makers"(Matt 5:9).We are surrounded by people who have a common need for the saving and transforming power of God in their lives. If we fail to focus our attention on them, we fail to perform our Christian ministry—no matter what else we do.

People are reached only by divine power, not human power—Spiritual power of God in dedicated hearts and lives. We must come to understand the effectiveness we might enjoy in Christ's service, and this will only come as the power of God works through us.

There is no doubt that a well-marketed, smoothly run church organization will attract people. But do they become filled with the spirit of God, or are they just there to bask in the "greatness" of the church organization?

We must be a yielding instrument by which the Holy Spirit might perform the work of God on this earth. Can we catch this vision that we really can be a part of the "Inner circle" helpers of God?

It is true that self-confidence and/or personal complacency hinders His work in us. If we were repentant, humble, spiritually empowered people, we could not be content to sit idly by while our work lags and people all around are on a fast track to destruction on a daily basis. James 2:17 tells us, "Faith, if it hath not works, is dead."

The churches I've been associated with show evidence that they seem to be more concerned with programs than (His) power; with form rather than with performance.

We need to have new spiritual life pumped into us. We need to be jolted out of our complacency and empowered for effective God directed service, and with the turmoil in many religious groups today, this may be the opportunity for His children to truly get focused on Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. "Off the milk and into the meat"—we learn to trust Him to do what we cannot do for ourselves.

I don't feel it's our job to guard an old orthodoxy or preside over ponderous institutions built by others—to be just a housekeeper or perform housekeeping chores in the house of faith built by the witness of others. Our task is to build a new beachhead of faith in a hostile world, reaching new territory for Christ, and we can do this only if we **focus on people and their spiritual power, rather than programs.**

There are so many unbelievers in the world today—atheism is capturing the minds of many, many people. Its appeal is intellectual as well as emotional. On the intellectual side, they are being taught that the idea of God is no longer necessary in our scientific age. The emotional appeal is to let go and let the inner unredeemed man answer the fall of the flesh.

We must try to reach them; they aren't going to come to our churches or us. They just aren't that curious and most do not believe we have anything worthwhile to say anyhow.

We, the called out ones (the church) must be aware and stay aware of the temptations to withdraw from the world into ourselves, as many have already done. We can become a dull reflection of our own culture, losing our Christian character. We must maintain our own identity even as we become thoroughly involved with a modern world in the act of witness and ministry on behalf of our Lord, who commands involvement, not withdrawal. We must find ways to relate effectively and positively to this society in which we find ourselves today.

We live in a new and different day. It's not enough simply to hold the faith of our fathers. We must come to understand what the faith of ours means today, how it is to be lived in our culture. This includes expressing the ancient gospel in terms of our day, without losing the essential truths we are trying to convey.

Preserving an orthodox set of beliefs will not accomplish very much for Jesus' sake if we are not able to communicate those beliefs to those around us and win people in an ever-widening circle.

We must earnestly face how we can do this with the truths Jesus gives us to reach secular men who are more inclined to doubt than believe.

Extending our faith in a secular age will require that we capitalize upon leadership with the best possible academic and spiritual training, **remembering that the purpose of leadership is not to control others.** We must be prepared to grant each other the freedom of thought which we have said is part of our Christian faith.

Unfortunately, we have been more enamored with conformity than liberty in our evangelical ranks. We must also be prepared to make greater dependence upon the Holy Spirit in convincing this age of the validity of the gospel when we present the truth.

I'd like to see us change the emphasis from defending the faults, to extending the faith in this age of unbelief. We spend too much time and effort being suspicious of each other and not enough in seeking creative ways of expressing the Gospel to those that have not heard it or understood it.

Man's understanding of Christian truths has a way of hardening over a period of time, losing its real power and capacity for growth. His understanding of vital doctrines becomes so rigid that he makes them empty symbols, little more than idols he worships without really remembering why.

The work of God's Spirit is to deepen our understanding of His truths—to keep us from growing content with only a partial understanding of the riches of the Bible. It's a sin to try to force God into a little imperfect, incomplete, rigid set of ideas. This was one of the great sins of the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. They refused to accept a Messiah who did not talk and act in accordance with their way of thinking!

This is why Jesus spoke of his teaching as a new wine with a fermenting force that would shatter the old wineskins—the rigid religious conceptions of the day. But even Jesus found himself limited by man's slowness to accept fresh and deeper insights into spiritual truths. His apostles argued with Him right up to the cross, that it might not happen to Him, and they totally rejected the idea of his resurrection until they were shocked into accepting the full truth of the resurrection of Christ Jesus—this central event of Christianity.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come to continue bruising old wineskins—bringing deeper and more accurate insight and application of Christian truths. Even to this day, it's a slow process in many people, when they are so rigid in their understanding —either idolizing their religious ideas or else practically dead to the work of the Holy Spirit—that the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit still must come with an explosive, shattering force.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was one of those times when the orthodoxy of the day was so rigid and set in their ways. The old wineskin was empty, the new skins and wine came forth.

What type of wineskins do we have? Are they brittle or are they new ones? (Examine yourself)

Let the Word Speak

Contrary to what some may teach, our doctrines, our traditions, and our basic beliefs need a periodic reexamination to be certain whether we stand upon traditions or truths. It is possible for a Bible-honoring people to substitute tradition for truth in such a subtle and gradual way that no one notices that a switch has been made. Hopefully, the faith, which is passed on from generation to generation, squares with the truth.

All churches do well occasionally to examine their doctrinal tenets in light of the Scriptures. Are our beliefs really founded on the Bible? Or are we merely holding to a tradition that is without foundation? Our basic beliefs are too important for us to leave them unexamined.

The word of God is still as sharp as a two-edged sword. It is still as profound and as meaningful as it ever was. It still offers the best insights on the nature and needs of humanity. It offers the only true peace the world can come to know, it gives guidelines to mankind in some of the most crucial issues he faces, and more important, it seeks to draw man into a living encounter with the Creator-Redeemer of Life who holds the universe in His hands.

If God is the answer about man's greatest needs, problems and dilemmas (I feel He is), the question we need to answer is, "**How** is God the answer?" We find the answer to this question by letting Him speak to us through His Word.

For one reason or another many people do not have a sense of God speaking to them through the Scriptures. For some it may be they do not have a basic understanding of how to read and interpret the Bible. Others may have devoted much effort to proclaiming the authority and inspiration of the Bible without really seeking to find out what God is saying to them through His Word. Still I know others who use the Bible as a history book or an encyclopedia to consult or to illustrate a point. Some approach it with preconceived ideas about what it says. **We need to recognize that He is speaking to us personally, today, in a living way.**

If the people could catch a fresh and vital sense of God speaking to us, there is no limit to what might happen to and through us in this age of uncertainty and turmoil.

We have to become aware that God is speaking to us today in our lives. The old-fashioned gospel of Christ, the Cross, forgiveness of sins, and an active new life in Christ, is as much up-to-date now as it was 2000 years ago.

Once I had some dear, dear friends who were having a taxing time writing down their understanding of "How do we know God?" What was so hard for these wonderful people is they continually used verbs in the past and future tense—and not one in the present tense! Having faith in that finished work of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago, and a hope for our future in Him, is only meaningful to us, as we understand how to apply it in our lives today.

If we are trying to teach a now generation with God and His gospel, our whole understanding must be cast in the present tense, making Him real today.

Not too many people have interest in the past or the future. People want to hear what is available for them right now in their lives. We must come to understand the message for today, to believe it, and to share it now in our writing and speaking.

So much of our teaching is looking back or looking forward. Have you ever given it any thought? Whether we intended it to be so or not, this has been the focus of the church. "Hold onto the doctrines of old, and focus of the future coming kingdom" has been the focus.

Most of our singing and talking sounds like an escape from reality. But life must be lived now, and the people can only be reached if we stay in touch with the present scene.

Please do not misunderstand what has just been stated. Christianity cannot be severed from its historical roots or its future hopes, but let us remember that God did something in the past in order that He might do something in the future and for us today in this generation.

If you think about it, the past is irrelevant and the future is impossible so far as Christian faith is concerned. So God is for now! Hope is for the future, Faith is for now. Why not listen?

Let us help people tell about their salvation experience with Christ. Let's help all we can to become concerned and compassionate for others, and let's lead them home to Christ. **Develop a concerned witness; it greatly encourages others.** It will also become a great joy to each of us.

Seek God always, pray, put feet on those prayers, do something, go with the love of God in you.

Listening for God

Are you really listening for God? Would you know if He spoke with you, or would you miss the message because you weren't listening?

Consider some examples of the people of God:

Acts 8:26-40: Philip, who was appointed to serve tables (Acts 6:5) received a message from an angel, baptized an Ethiopian, then preached in all the cities on the coast of Judea. This was the first missionary thrust in Christianity.

Acts 9: Ananias heard the Lord tell him to go to Saul, the arch persecutor of the church.

Acts 10: God shocked Peter through a message that was an unusual vision, in order to break the Jewish straitjacket that was holding Christianity, and go to Cornelius, a Gentile.

Acts 13: The Holy Spirit instructed the church at Antioch to send Paul and Barnabas out on a missionary journey. This was the second missionary thrust in Christianity.

Acts 16: Paul's experience at Troas, the vision of the man of Macedonia calling for help. The result, Paul crossed over into Macedonia and the Western world, rather than turning back eastward, as would have appeared more logical.

The point is that in each of these examples God delivered a message, probably unexpected and in most cases rather surprising in content, to the individuals and groups through whom He was working.

Does God try to get through more messages today than we hear? Do we miss some important leadership from God because we are not listening, or because we have predetermined what God might or might not say to us, and therefore would be unable to receive a message that indicated something unexpected or unusual?

Teaching

Jesus is a master teacher from beginning to end. We must learn to listen and depend on Him! He will give us what we need to know of Him and of all matter.

The cutting edge of the church is teaching. That's the Great Commission.

We are to enroll people in the school of Christ—teaching them His precepts and leading them to fashion their lives after Him.

A convert becomes a disciple, and a disciple is one who seeks to acquire the knowledge, attitude, and character of His Master Teacher. This is the heart of the work of the church; teaching, and leading people to become disciples of Jesus, the Master Teacher.

Liberty

The true purpose of liberty is given here:

> Gal 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, **serve one another in love.**
>
> 14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."
>
> 15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

If we allow ourselves to become involved in the unchristian activity described in verse 15, there can be one result, we will be consumed by one another. Freedom is not a liberty to serve our lower selfish nature.

Work

You know a church will grow when its people put feet to their prayers. Their prayers and their faithful relationship to Jesus Christ are most essential for a truly effective church. But meaningful faith has to have a roadway on which to run and operate.

God wants to bless His work, but so many want His blessing without the work. God will not often do for us what we are unwilling to attempt for ourselves.

I'm often reminded that methods alone will not produce significant growth for a church. And that is true. But just "being spiritual"—meaning that no at-

tempt will be made to develop good organization and utilize proven methods—won't do either.

Be sure, the Holy Spirit is the effective agent of God's church and His work. The Spirit usually chooses to work through human instruments in accomplishing the work. We, the church, must develop the channels for the Holy Spirit to use to do His indispensable work.

The people must be fed an enriched well-rounded diet to strengthen and stimulate mind and body. Things just don't happen, you have to do something. Get started and God will help you. We can pray, but dedicated work must follow. We all must work as though it all depends on each one of us.

Objectives will not necessarily be the same in all churches. Plan your goals; work at them. Be careful they do not become an end in themselves, where you have too much organization—which can happen. Organization is not meant to be a substitute for Spiritual Power. Organization alone does not work for God.

You and I must understand **organization is no more than a tool** to serve a Godly purpose. We must be able to work but maintaining our spiritual perspective.

The physical location of the church assembly is where we specifically come to worship, and worship is the basic relationship of the Christian God. Basically, every worship experience involves a recognition of God and a personal response to Him.

Devotion

Thanksgiving, praise, confession, and good music are valuable aids to worship. Good atmosphere is also part of meaningful worship. Listening for God to speak and expecting Him to act is a point of mature faith.

It's strange that one of the chief problems in some churches is a lack of a clear sense of purpose, of mission. Without a sense of purpose, our actions will be rather useless for God. Each church must hammer out its own approach, but God's principles must be carried on throughout our activity.

Care for the total person

Efforts should be made to meet all human need—mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual. To feed and clothe a person but fail to tell him of Christ's transforming power is to cheat him. To feed and clothe him only to gain an opportunity to preach to him is to disillusion him. It's not a matter of evangelism versus social ministry. It is a matter of caring for that total human need, and that calls for both activities. The church's ministry should not be a humanitarian project. It should be distinctly Christian—powered by the Holy Spirit.

- The motivation is the love of God in Christ. This should be emphasized not hidden.
- Minister with a community, not in it or to it.
- Help people to help themselves.
- Undertake only what can be done well.
- Focus on people more than program design.
- Prepare for difficulties. Be flexible and innovative.
- Prevent as well as correct.
- Relate ministry to survival needs.
- Stress a connection with the past as well as the challenge of the new.
- Use church program organizations.
- Avoid one-sided approach.
- Demonstrate that the ministry aids spiritual growth.
- Answer objections considerately.
- Utilize a variety of methods to educate and motivate.
- Emphasize the Biblical basis for ministry.

Trained Workers

Unless we train some spiritually qualified workers among the men and women in our groups, many people will not get the help they need in the initial stages of Christian growth. Adequate follow-up is needed, otherwise the people will flounder and not develop into strong disciples of Christ. The church may then become a "revolving door" because the people will not stay. The whole process begins with Our Lord, but His leaders are expected to follow-up with proper training in order to end up with mature disciples. (Consider carefully our responsibility.)

You can deal with one problem and no sooner is that solved, another will arise. The transition from carnal to Spiritual brings people problems, and ministry should expect and anticipate them. **There is a great need for spiritual leaders in our local areas.** It may be a dream, but what a dream, to have a dedicated, ever-growing band of spiritually qualified men and woman who could help handle some of the "Spiritual" problems that keep coming up in the church.

This is more than just taking tapes to someone, or to visiting with shut-ins, or delivering food, clothing and financial aid to the needy, or the many other affairs of the church. But it is people who could, who would, have the Spiritual know-how to win another person to Christ and then take that person from the time of his or her conversion and help them to become a solid, dedicated, committed, fruitful mature disciple who could in time repeat that process in the life of another called human being.

Today, it seems that more attention is given to the gifts of the Spirit (1Cor 12 & 14) than to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), more to special endowments than to changes in character and life style brought about by the Spirit.

Questions for consideration:

1. Is the church an institution or a movement?
2. What does it—the church—mean to you?
3. Do you need the church and why?
4. Does God want a whole lot of big and little churches all over the place?
5. Do you choose the church or does God?
6. Is church growth the point of success? Or
7. Is the church being true to the Gospel the point of success?
8. Are we, the local churches, teaching the people to witness, calling them back to their roots, especially in the Old Testament prophets, and the theology of Paul as he followed Christ as an example for us? ("For me to live is Christ!")
9. What is it that makes a church, a church?
10. Does loss of growth in statistics mean something—the numbering of losses or increases in people? Could it be the dead wood is gone, the faithful remnant remains?

Maybe the ones remaining are not the greatest, the choir may be flat and the children may come home confused between Noah's Ark and the Ark of the Covenant, but the people are there because God is there. Nearly every time the New Testament mentions the place where a church meets, it is in a home.

That's why we must learn the faithfulness of our God. It is no accident the Holy Spirit is playing such a vital part in renewal of the Work today. We need to be confronted by God daily, as the men of old were, to obey Him in all matters.

According to knowledge

We must learn, just as Paul had to learn—when he was called Saul—that his zeal for God was not according to knowledge, but found out he was on the wrong track.

Paul was a Jew, educated according to the strict manner of the law. (Act 22:3) He was a Hebrew, an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham (I Cor 11:22). A Pharisee, a son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). Yet he had to come to understand he was nothing without God. He had to do it the hard way and it had to be this way for him. So many of us today believe we are working for God, but the fact of the matter is that "God hasn't happened to us yet".

Do you know God? Can you say, "Behold here is the Lord!" with complete confidence?

Family

The local Congregation is a group of people who independently come together through a special calling by the Father. They are united through the Holy Spirit to achieve certain goals and purposes in their individual and collective lives. Through this bond of love they form a special family. It is by understanding the purpose of being apart of this family that we begin to understand our part of doing the work on the local level.

In a family there must always be genuine concern for one another, otherwise the family becomes self-centered and will eventually all head in their own direction. "As we have opportunity let us do good unto all men, especially unto them are of the household of faith." (Gal. 6:10). "But if any provide not for his own and especially for those of his own house he has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel" (1Tim. 5:8). This shows that we are to pay special attention to our new family in the faith.

God shows that by focusing on these works we are following the Spirit doing the work of faith. By neglecting those who are in need is actually rejecting the faith that God gives to us. And it says in Heb. 11.6, "But without faith it is impossible to please Him."

To be in a congregation only to be taught and not show concern and love for others would be wasting your time, for that is selfishness rather than love.

We can see that we must have faith to be pleasing to God. **But we must be doing something with that faith.** James 2:17 tells us, "Even so faith without works is dead being alone." Also Verse 26.

So then one of the primary concerns must be the people. And to show our concern we must have works which are our outreach of what we believe inside, Showing concern for others in need.

Focus on and pray for one another, take the time, having the faith to know God is listening.

"Blessed are they that mourn" (Matt. 5:4). "Bear you one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). To understand how we bear each other's burdens is given to us by understanding the Law of Christ. "These things I command you, that you love one another" (John 17:17). "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19).

This is the key to bearing others burdens. Think how you would feel if you personally had the problems (would you concentrate on yourself?) then give others the same consideration you would give yourself.

We need to confess faults to each other (James

5:16). It is not a natural thing for people to admit to mistakes. When people begin coming to you with their problems they see something there. By you taking the time to listen, it helps to relieve the burden. This is being the light, the example or our lives "In Christ"—Him living in us.

Here are a few of Paul's instructions for the congregation:

> Acts 20:35: I have showed you all things, how that so laboring you ought to support the work, and remember the words of our Lord Jesus, it is more blessed to give than to receive.
>
> Rom 15:2 Let everyone of us please his neighbor for his good, to edification".
>
> Rom 15:7 Wherefore receive you one another as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.
>
> Phil 4:9 Those things which you have both learned and received and heard and seen in me, do, and the God of peace shall be with you.

To have God with us is to be following and setting the example, In Christ Jesus.

The Business End

Many church leaders cannot seem to answer specific questions any more. The needs of the individual are often not considered. Instead, they've made the Gospel into a set of programs, pledges, doctrinal statements, rules and regulations to which you may refer, or ask your pastor to interpret. The Christian Gospel was intended to be a way of life. It should be an attitude from within.

The business end of religion has become most appalling. The ties of organized religion are too tight. The church must evolve to relate to today's world. There just isn't any way to stop the world and make it wait until the church catches up.

People want and need answers to questions—any and all questions we are faced with today. We, as the church, should be ready and willing to face all questions and openly discuss them and prayerfully hope for answers to them. The atmosphere should be completely clear of any and all fear of recrimination. **As Christians we should never sit in judgment of other human beings.** This is what a lot of the churches continue to do.

The responsibility of the congregation is plainly stated. Preach the gospel, teach all people, care for the poor and elderly, provide for the widows, visit the sick, and give to those in need.

Also we are to pray always for those who are sick, and to heal the sick; speak no evil of anyone; do good unto all men; cast out demons; live the Godly life; be an example; we are the light set on a hill.

All the above things we are commanded to do, and humanly speaking, it is an impossible task, but "with God, all things are possible"(Mat 19:26).

Preach The Gospel

In the past we have had a misconception on the statement, "Preach the Gospel."

"Preach" in Greek carries these meanings: 1) To speak divine truth (inspired speaking), 2) proclaim, 3) publish, 4) to herald, as a public crier, 5) declare, signify, 7) talk, 8) tell, 9) utter, 10) to lay forth, explanation, 11) to relate to a subject matter, 12) to break silence, 13) show, 14) teach.

After you understand the meaning of the various Greek words translated "to preach," you come to a totally different understanding than the one our society has given you over the years.

To preach is to talk to others about the same gospel—meaning the news of what Jesus Christ has given us, including repentance and baptism and the application of living a Godly life. And by talking, we are expounding with explanations of the divine truths which we have been given, it is by His grace that we share the Gospel and help others relate it to themselves personally.

It is also to herald as a warning of the impending disasters ahead, like in the old days, when they would have their town criers to cry aloud to the cities. Then you must follow up with those who will listen, and show them how they can prepare for the problems that lie ahead.

The work of the watchman is to warn the people of the impending disasters that lie ahead. In Ezekiel, God says if the watchman doesn't warn them, then their blood would he on his hands. The watchman—an overall evangelistic program—can only do the warning, but there must also be local congregations to follow up with those that God has called to open their minds to repent. It doesn't do any good to strike fear into people and not have members to be there to show—by teaching and personal example—them what this New Life is all about. The warning is only the beginning step in a process of development to becoming God's children.

Also the local congregation cannot sit back and depend on just one man to be the watchman. The local congregation should feel about the Gospel message,

just as Paul did, that we are to do the work totally as if the entire work depended on each one of us, that the warning message in Ezekiel is for us in our local congregations.

I believe we must do as Paul did, care for the other churches and see that their needs are cared for, supporting them whenever we can. However, for our local group, we must work as if we are by ourselves, depending on God for our needs, and if any outside help comes along, be grateful and count it as a blessing, but we must continue to depend on God and hopefully, through Him, each other.

It seems that Paul lived by this principle. After his 3 1/2 years of being personally taught by Jesus, he went right out and began working. It was three years before ever he met some of the apostles, then again fifteen years later, and even then they added nothing to Paul (Gal 2:6). He relied on God and continued in His work.

Paul spoke very strongly about his desire to teach the people. He also felt the importance of dependency on God to accomplish the work. "I must by all means preach the gospel," "I strive to preach the gospel," "be ready at all times, in season and out of season." His preaching wasn't simply talking about Jesus Christ, but he also was fulfilling all the commission; showing mercy, feeding the sick, caring for the needy, and all the other responsibilities given to the church.

Summary

So what does it take for a local congregation to fulfill its mission?

First is the defining of its goals. The willingness to accept the responsibility for fulfilling these goals is inherent in their definition.

I feel the local church must have clear-cut goals, purpose, long range projects. Goals must be as concrete, specific, and they must be believable. If you don't believe, you can't achieve a goal. You just won't pay the price.

Goals must be adjusted to new information. Adjust them down if they become unbelievable or up if they are too easy. Maintain a balance between long range and short term goals.

The people must become involved in the plans; not having them jammed down their throats. Have the work to be in harmony so the people will back the goals and directions set up. Review them regularly. Don't chisel them in granite, sometimes you'll have to change them.

Expect good things to happen to you and more than likely they will. Set activity goals, not production goals. Activity will lead to production if God is in it. (If God is not in it, it would be better not to produce anything—Matt 23:15.)

Help the people to know what is important in the work for their lives. Show them that they, individually, are really important, just as important as the ordained activity, because without the people whom God calls there would be no work for any of us.

Second, it will take leaders, men and women with understanding and trust (faith) in God to do what He says He will do. There is a need for men to serve as elders in a local church in all its growth and needs.

Third, the church has to have the financial funds or donated items and labor to operate.

Fourth, the local church has to have an outreach outside of itself, and also its local area. The commission is given to those who believe and have repented, gone through conversion, baptism, the laying on of hands, and receiving of God's most wonderful gift, His Holy Spirit. This makes us a new spiritual being, who is usable by God!

The commission so many speak about in so many ways is not given to just a few men, but to all who become the begotten children of God.

All must work the works of God in one way or another, not just get behind one man. There is an inherent danger in doing this. Followers of men seem to let others make decisions for them and think this relieves them of their responsibility to do the work themselves. Many of us have heard the idea that "members are called to pray and pay idea", and it does not work the good work, the true work of God.

A congregation of believers should first know their fellowship is with God our Father, through Jesus Christ. (1Cor.1:9). By joining with Him we are joined together to the vine and have fellowship with one another.

Through this fellowship in the local congregation, the flock is fed by those who are spiritually able to share the Word of God, not only the Sabbath services and Bible studies, but in all types of every-day life and what it means in the light of God.

Of course, there are activities such as youth, singles, men's clubs, women's clubs, picnics and so on, which are always in order, depending on the size and make-up of the group. These activities can be a help in learning to work and grow together, but the people should be able to freely choose to partake of them or not.

There are other activities where people can learn to reach outside of themselves to others in their local areas. **Love can only grow if it's given away and shared with others, just as God has done with us.** Living the physical life brings on many needs for all of

us. Sharing the love of God with others through their needs is part of the commission overlooked by many in getting a message out. Life is to be lived now. The future is hope, yet a dream, but in Christ a real dream.

If the local congregation does not go out of itself except to sponsor a few people doing a TV, radio or tape ministry, there is a real danger of not ever learning to do the work of God in their own local area, in their own hearts and minds. **Learning how to get involved with the lives of other's, involves trusting God to lead our efforts,** for what human can truly know the intimate needs of others. It becomes guesswork without God!

It's easier to let someone else do the job—even pay someone else to do it, than to do it ourselves. You don't have to see the troubled faces and hearts of the people—this way it's safer. We can just sit back and look at His work from a distance or read about it, or be told about it. But this isn't the right or best way because we individual children of God are to be the light unto the world, one from which His people can be guided. We must become responsible people, for we'll have to answer for it someday before our God.

The electronic ministry of TV and radio, and now Internet, may be a very fine tool to get the Word out, but it needs most of all a place to send the people **to come into fellowship with others who are like minded.** We need more than a headquarters or mega-church to complete the work, we need every individual God calls, they are all important and they must be taught this. The difference between the TV or radio ministry and the local ministry is that those teaching are there—right there—with the people. A church elder's job is to become aware and be a part of the personal lives of the people. When needed, he is to share their personal convictions, family problems, to counsel with them regularly, when sickness, sorrow or tragedy disturbs their lives. This is the apex of God's love, His command to love one another, to share the good and the bad to carry this love one to another. This is important to each and every one of us, to know we can depend on the elders as well as others in the local group. To know the local church will be there with love and God's presence when needed. We are all being prepared to minister to His children.

The Bible does speak of elders in churches who should be able to guide local community projects, activities and church programs. Most of all, they should be witnesses, personal witnesses for Jesus Christ to all local people in or out of the church. They should have personal interest in people's lives.

I have felt for years there has been an imbalance in the understanding of the importance of a local church and its operations, from the top to the bottom. Both reaching the masses with the gospel, and reaching the local people with tender loving personal care requires our attention and our love. Most of all they need our working faith, not just leaving it up to someone else, but working in harmony with Christ to do the work.

Remember, it has to be for the Spiritual intent that the work be done, just as God has revealed it to us in His Word. We all want the same thing, make no mistake about that. First, we want salvation, eternal life. He has given it to us in Christ Jesus, and it's free, a beautiful wonderful gift of love He shares with us all who believe.

He has said not to forsake the assembly of yourselves together in His Name. In honor of Him we come together to share the love He has already shared with us. We come to learn and to grow in the very image of His Son—the character of Jesus Christ.

Why do we ourselves want to come together? Most of us want to be fed from Him, from His every Word, to be led by His Spirit. By being among others in like mind we grow in unity with Him.

We come to be helped in our doubts and our frustrations, and eventually we will come to acknowledge that we can't do it by ourselves. We learn from others that there is hope for us to become changed person. We can see it as we share with one another, this growth **in** Christ Jesus.

I feel God helps us to grow more effectively as we learn to share all things with others.

Prayer is born out of a need in us, with the assurance that it will be met. Prayer is our crying out for help from within us to another. As prayer is a spiritual exercise, so is the assembly of ourselves together, to strengthen each other in His Will and His Love.

The local congregation is a training ground, first to learn about ourselves in our relationship to God, then we learn to apply the principle of loving the brethren with a Godly Love. This prepares us to expand His Love to the secular world around us.

Redemption is of no value to anyone as long as people are ignorant of it. Our work is to teach all of God's called out ones, bringing them up to the full maturity in Christ Jesus.

Each person that gets involved in the work has a special part of it. Many will have to be shown how to do it and how to care enough to get involved. We need to teach them all things just as our Lord has revealed them to us.

Remember, the Master said no greater commandment than this, "To love one another as He has loved us all." Consider carefully how He did it for us.

Women and Their Struggle for Identity

by Tommy Willis

In this article I would like to share some thoughts about the struggle women often go through with their identity in the process of being wives and mothers. I actually got started into this study by having someone ask me questions about it. I do not have all the answers, but I do feel that it is an important problem for some women as they struggle to make the transition to (and from) wives and mothers. Hence, I have studied it for the past year and now write about it.

Nothing I am sharing here is to downplay Motherhood, because being **a mother is looked upon very highly by God,** even though it is downplayed by society. And women should look to be mothers, it is a great honor and very fulfilling, because that is what God planned for women. But some of us are from dysfunctional families and Church organizations, and there is a problem that often comes up with women struggling with their identity as they go about the task of caring for their families. In a perfect family setting there may not be much of a problem for women, but many of us are from dysfunctional families and maybe even dysfunctional Church groups. Some women will have a real battle with their identity as they go about raising their families.

Although both men and women have difficulty finding their identity, it seems to be more difficult for women at times because of the pressure society puts on women to conform. The cultural context of the time makes it harder for women to find or keep their identity. The roles society writes for women have often hindered them from finding much of their potential.

Different points of history have defined what an "ideal" female body is supposed to be. In the last century the little girls in China use to have their feet wrapped tightly, because it was taught the perfect female body was to have tiny feet. Some of these women are still alive and they are elderly crippled women who can't walk because of what was done to them.

Do you think all of this mentality is gone from our culture, today? Just look at the magazine wracks and you will see what society is still telling us what the "perfect" female body is supposed to be. Read them to see how the "perfect" female is supposed to act. Many parents are alarmed because their daughters are starving themselves and doing other strange things so they can be accepted by the script that society has written.

Women often reach the point where they say things like: **"I don't know who I am anymore."** They can suffer a loss of identity. Some can reach the breaking point and eventually need intense help just to want to stay alive. Not all of the problem may be identity, but on some occasions it is.

As we grow our culture is woven into our identity; we become the roles that society says we should play. These "powerful cultural pressures" help form the identity of **both men and women.**

Women often have to rediscover their true identities. It can get lost as they become wife, mother, and homemaker. They get into these roles to the point that they have trouble identifying their personal needs, desires, and feelings.

Women often say things like: "all that matters now is the children". And they are often unaware of deep needs that are going to eventually cause problems that will effect them raising their children. Certainly it is noble to care for the children this way, but it will eventually effect the children when the mother is reaching breaking points because of failing to have her own needs fulfilled. The mother has to understand her own needs and take steps to have them dealt with. God is not against this. They must understand their needs. This can help them be better mothers as they function with less frustration as some of those needs are fulfilled.

Isn't it better for the women to understand their needs and the time they may need to be alone, or take the time for a walk, or hobby, so that they can have their needs better taken care of? This can help them function better—as mothers and all of life they have to deal with. Not all women will have the same battle with this, but it is something we need to be aware of and give some thought to, because many women go through this battle. **Balance** is what we need.

And we cannot blame it all on society—I'm not getting into the blame game here, because a lot of the problem is the **transition** women make when they have to go from single/wife and from wife/mother. And it is often very difficult to make these transitions. But it will help if we realize how difficult this transition is for many women. Society only plays a part, transition is another part of the battle.

The best way to start to deal with it is for women to **pray and be honest about what they are feeling and thinking.** To acknowledge their own needs so that something can be done about it. By examining what one is honestly thinking and feeling is the best way to help make the transition.

Some women learn to make the transition better than others. Some may find they need to take a long walk each day; or by taking a long drive in their car. As believers we need to seek God and His guidance with this time. With the pressures of this modern soci-

ety—almost everyone I have talked to that took the time to do this was blessed by it. Be honest about what your feeling and thinking, don't let the pressures build up. Talk to God about them, and to others whom you can. God says to seek wise counsel; and in many counselors there is safety—**Prov 11:14, 15:22.**

As women go about trying to balance their commitments to the children, husband, groceries, and perhaps aging parents, along with trying to get in their studies—it can all get to be overwhelming. Sometimes in the pressure of the day we may find that we have only ten minutes to talk to God. If so, then **put your heart into those ten minutes.** I have had God pull me back from great distraction by ten minutes of prayer; to where I received His peace to go on in those ten minutes. This is not to use it as an excuse to only pray ten minutes every day, but to be aware when we are pressed for time on certain days that God can often give us His strength in those short prayers.

I have often watched the struggles women go through. Just think of the mother who is trying to break up a fight with two of her younger children while the baby is crying in the stroller, and she cries out to God for strength to handle it all. I think many of us men are going to be surprised one day when God gives these women position and honor above ours.

God made women with a deep desire to care and nurture her husband and children. And it is very fulfilling for a woman to care for her family this way; this is what God intended. Much of her identity will be in caring for her family this way, for a mother is what she is. It's easy for people to misunderstand what I'm trying to share here. **Some women look for fulfillment so badly outside the home that they can miss the joy of motherhood while they have it.**

So we need to be careful about what I'm trying to share in this article, some have misunderstood. That's why I have had to stress the importance of how fulfilling it is for a woman to be a mother. But we need to understand the **principle of coming to know ourselves and not to lose our identity** in the process of the transition women go through as they become wives and mothers.

Women's Role in Society

A woman is not to be an extension of the man to the point that she is **only** "Frank's wife", or "Joe's wife" etc. But identity problems can develop as a woman may lose sight of her individuality. Certainly God wants a man and women to work as one in marriage, this is part of the fulfillment in marriage. But we must also understand the balance necessary for **individuality.**

Women should be devoted to their family; this is God's plan. But over the centuries the general idea of society was that women give up all interest and dreams in order to devote their lives to the husband and children. To the point that meant if they had a gift (such as writing), they were not encouraged to use it. Is it any wonder that many of the best women writers of the 19th century were unmarried?—Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Jane Austen, Emily Bronte—to name a few.

In no way am I trying to take away from the responsibility that God says women have to their families. **That must be in place or they will pay a price before God.** And Motherhood is looked upon highly by God. The problem is it is downplayed by society. And there is **much fulfillment** in being a mother; this is what God intended. But sometimes because of the way society has taught us, women can get out of balance with it and began to lose their identity in the process.

Women were programmed by a culture that treated them like second class citizens. In the 1800's doctor's thought, "women inferiority was due to smaller and less efficient brains". As a result even upper class women stayed at home doing the housework while their brothers went away to the university.

As we come to the twentieth century doors were opened and the creative ability of women writers blossomed forth. "Women could vote, own property, and achieve higher education. Technology eased housework, and allowed the time for working on their creative ability". And the power of the female pen has now touched the hearts and minds of millions. Although **much** progress has been made, still, **some** of the old mentality has been there and it has effected the Churches also.

But before this breakthrough in the twentieth century—women often had to publish their work anonymously, and under a man's name. Growing up, young girls were not encouraged to use the gifts they had. Even their mothers taught them they could not go after some of the dreams they had, but that they should settle down and be content with housework. This certainly effected the growth of the individual. There is more growth as women are encouraged to use their gifts.

Women's Role in Church Services

Many church groups today teach it is wrong for women to speak in a church service. But from what I have understood in my studies is that Paul was talking about a specific problem that was going on with that church at that time. **You have to put all the scriptures together to get a picture.**

God tells us that **both** men and women will be inspired to speak the Word of God:

> Acts 2:16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

17 "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your **sons and daughters** will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

18 Even on my servants, **both men and women,** I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."

Many Churches have a problem with allowing women to speak. But this is God's Word that I'm sharing with you, not my own conjectures about what I think the scriptures say. This scripture is very clear that women are moved to speak just like men are.

The same Spirit is able to work in that women can be inspired to speak and write the Word of God. This is not a point of trying to say which class is better, there is no class distinction here, God says we are not to lord it over one another:

Gal 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, **male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

The scripture is often brought up where it says for a woman to submit to her husband—Eph 5:22—And of course this scripture can be twisted, and sometimes has been used by some to abuse women. But the verse **before** that says to "Submit yourselves to one another in the fear of God" (v 21). So it does not mean that women are not to function as individuals. But both men and women should have the proper respect for one another in their place before God. We need to put all the scriptures together to get the picture that God wants us to have. It does not mean men or to lord it over or abuse women.

For fifteen years I was a part of a Church group of 12-14 people. And we functioned according to a 1Cor 14:31 open format, **where each had a chance to speak.** And many times the women spoke as much if not more than the men at those meetings. So I have watched God's Holy Spirit in action as the women spoke the Word of God. I am not just writing **about** an idea here, but I am writing **about something that has been a living experience.** Something that I witnessed for fifteen years!

As the end of the age draws near God says He will pour out His Spirit on all flesh. And there will be an **increase of both men and women** who are moved to share God's Word. Both will minister to their brothers and sisters. If we cannot accept this because of previous erroneous teachings—then we will suffer loss. And we will have to answer to God for rejecting what His Word plainly says.

As women learn more of the freedom to function and use the talents and abilities they were given, this will aid them in finding their identity; which will also lead them to finding their identity in Christ. Let us not put burdens on one another. Let us stand fast in the liberty were Christ has made us free—Gal 5:1.

Divorce Makes it Worse

Many women after divorce go through a very traumatic time. Some of the struggle will be problems with identity as they go about trying to readjust once again.

As we study into the lives of women who went through divorce, many say things like: "I put my singing career on hold, and gave up my dreams in order to become his wife and raise the children." I heard these words while watching TV yesterday. Although much of a woman's identity and fulfillment will be in being a mother, I don't think it is wrong for her to have some goals and dreams outside of motherhood; if that's what she desires.

We need to be careful while studying this subject, because some will think this is pushing the feminist movement in what I'm trying to share here. But the feminist movement came along and sometimes tried to make women feel foolish or wrong for trying to find fulfillment as mothers and homemakers. **And some can get into a situation of looking so badly for fulfillment outside the home that they will miss the joy of motherhood while they have it.** You often here women say, "I'm only a mother and house wife." And that's because society downplays motherhood. But in God's sight it is a **very high and noble calling,** and it should not be taken lightly.

But the woman in this TV program had given up her goals and dreams, and one day her husband decided he wanted a divorce. She felt lost. Her identity was so wrapped up in being "his wife", and being only an extension of his goals and dreams, as she helped him become a successful businessman, that she didn't know who she was anymore. And it was devastating to her when her husband decided he wanted a divorce.

The whole TV program was about divorced women and the struggles they go through; it went through the lives of about six divorced women. And over and over again the women said that they didn't know who they were anymore. They felt they had a place in their family, but when that fell apart they felt lost.

Some were further along than others and were starting to adjust. But as I watched the faces of some of the women, there was such emptiness; there wasn't much there. The wife of one powerful attorney said she never stopped to think who she was without him, that

she had "lost herself" as she worked to help him become a successful lawyer. All these women suffered through a great identity crisis. Many believers go through the same thing. I've known of many cases.

They discussed that one of the most dangerous things to do was to just put on a façade and act as if nothing is wrong. But the ones who sought help in group therapy by being around other women who were going through the same thing—they were helped greatly.

Churches Should Help Not Hurt

Sometimes religious organizations have added to the problem of people struggling with identity. They are told to be a certain way, and to think a certain way, and free-thinking is not encouraged. The institutions we have been a part of have often stifled creative thought. This has effected both men and women from finding their identity.

If the Church organizations stifled our growth, then how could this not hinder us from finding our identity? For we need to find our identity to have the proper growth.

In relating to women writers of the 19th century, one author once said that, "Women authors often avoided religion and marriage because they felt they could better keep their identity this way". This got me to thinking—**if they would have only known the true religion of the Bible, they wouldn't have felt that way.** God will teach us the proper balance in it all if we will seek Him as we should. And women will make a better transition into being wives and mothers; to where they will be a smoother transition as they go from single to wives and mothers.

Many church groups do not encourage growth of the individual. Both men and women have had a hindrance in growth because of this mentality that the institutions taught us. I'm not saying this is done intentionally, for many of the leaders are in ignorance themselves, **so we must be careful not to judge.** But we must be aware of what is going on around us.

The scriptures plainly tell us that women are inspired to speak the Word of God—**Act 2:16-18.** But some believe that it is even wrong for a woman to say the opening and closing prayer at Church services.

Having experienced an open type format for many years, no one could ever convince me that it is wrong to do this. I watched the women open and close meetings with prayer for over fifteen years. And I know that this was not a dishonor to God; I watched the blessing it was for the women to participate and be a part of the meetings as God intended. This open type setting encouraged women to be themselves and to express what was on their minds.

As I went through these series of identity articles, to leave out the struggle women go through with their identity would have left the series unfinished. **An open type format where both men and women are allowed to speak would help almost any congregation.**

In the book of Acts we see that Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9).

Can you imagine the people telling these four women that they could not speak at the church meetings? It would be ridiculous to think that these women were given a gift just to prophesy at home but not use it at the Church meetings. That would have hindered the gift that God had given them to edify the Church!

We need to really take a good look at what scriptures say brethren. All of the problems that have been there in the Church organizations have often added to the problems that women have in finding their identity in the first place. We don't need to add to that burden, but should allow the freedom to function so that we can all be better edified.

Let us learn to find the freedom that Christ gives. Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty—**2Cor 3:17.** This does not mean the abandonment of family responsibilities, but the forming of **personal spiritual goals** (prayer, Bible study, service, etc.) which give each person an identity in Christ. Yes, some of our **truly unimportant** family routines may need to be diminished. But as we get to know God for ourselves and learn to let one another function, more and more women and men will find their identity in Jesus Christ. 📖

Share Your Shelter

Our Savior never argued or tried to force someone to believe in Him. We should not do that either. But if *Shelter in the Word* has helped you, you can share it with others who might be interested in it or helped by it. One of these methods might work for you.

1. Talk to them about what you have learned and encourage them to study the Bible themselves.
2. Copy your *Shelter* and give it to them (almost any office or copy store will do this for $1 to $2).
3. Give them your *Shelter* (we will send you a replacement issue if you write or call).
4. Copy just this page or write down the address or phone so they can request their own subscription.

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