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Editor's Note

Mark Dever recently said to his church, "If you don't have friends in the church, you deprive us pastors of some of our best tools for reaching out to you, especially when you're hurt or beginning to stray." Many talk about "community" and "*koinonia*." But what do these consist of, if not God-established, Christ-focused, Spirit-empowered friendships?

Friendship is one of the primary means of grace the Lord uses to keep church members growing in grace and bound to one another—like the sinews between muscles. Friendship helps church members to fight sin, disciple younger Christians, and spur one another on to love and good deeds. After all, friendship is a bond of mutual affection, trust, and commitment; and two individuals will most quickly influence one another within the context of such affection and trust. It's a basic fact of human nature, I believe, that we more quickly *believe* and *follow* individuals whom we know love us and are committed to us. Likewise, we'll take greater care in encouraging those whom we love. That's what friendship affords. So a pastor who practices and encourages healthy friendships in his congregation is building transmission lines between individuals for the free exchange of gospel goods.

Though he doesn't focus on the local church itself, Michael Haykin raises this much overlooked topic for us in the context of Scripture and church history. Owen Strachan describes the importance of friendship between pastors and younger men for training ministers. Cory Megorden and Michael Lawrence, presenting complementary visions for small groups, show how Christian relationships help us fight sin and do the work of pastoral ministry. The two pieces on hospitality, which include contributions from Donald Whitney and Ken Sande, point to how important befriending strangers is for displaying the gospel. Brent Thomas introduces us to a good book on hospitality.

Michael McKinley extends the conversation back to the Puritan's uses of church membership. Greg Gilbert and Matt Schmucker close out the issue with two practical exhortations: get involved in your church, and take your church covenant seriously.

In the end, it's hard to do better than Michael W. Smith: "Friend's are friends forever, if the Lord's the Lord of them."

--Jonathan Leeman

FRIENDS



With a Little Help From My Friends

Page 4

What do some of the greatest figures in history—from Plato to Aristotle, King David to the Apostle John, and Gregory of Nazianzus to John Calvin—have in common? They knew how critical friendship was for life and eternity. Do you?

By Michael A. G. Haykin



Befriending Timothy

Page 10

Pastors should aspire to influence not just their own churches, but churches elsewhere and in the next generation. Therefore, befriend a Timothy.

By Owen Strachan



Using Small Groups to Fight Sin

Page 13

Oscar Wilde once said, "A true friend stabs you in the front." When it comes to fighting sin, Wilde was more right than he realized.

By Corby Megorden



Using Small Groups to Cultivate Fellowship

Page 15

"You want a friend in Washington?" President Truman quipped. "Get a dog." Not so at one Washington church. Among the tools used to cultivate fellowship are small groups.

By Michael Lawrence

STRANGE FRIENDS



A Meal Says More than You Think: A Biblical Theology of Hospitality

Page 18

Christian hospitality is far more important than most Christians recognize.

By Jonathan Leeman

Three Testimonies of Hospitality

Page 23

9News asked several friends to share a testimony about the impact they've seen hospitality have.

Answers from Ken Sande, Donald S. Whitney, and Ryan Townsend



Book Review:

The Hospitality Commands by Alexander Strauch

Page 25

Reviewed by Brent Thomas

AND CHURCH MEMBERS



Church Membership in a World Without NASCAR

Page 27

The Puritans didn't have the NFL or NASCAR, so they studied church membership. We could learn a lot from them.

By Michael McKinley



Wanted: Plotting and Provoking Church Members

Page 30

The Bible doesn't simply tell Christians to *attend* church, it tells them to plot, plan, conspire, contrive, and design how to stir up brothers and sisters to love and good works.

By Greg Gilbert



9Marks Greatest Hits: What is Our Church Covenant?

Page 33

In case your dial was on a different station the first time this piece played, here's the Capitol Hill Baptist Church membership class on its church covenant, the document which charts how church members agree to live practically with God and one another.

By Matt Schmucker

AUDIO—LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWS

The Gospel and Islam: go to <http://resources.christianity.com/default/mrki.aspx>.

Post date: 12/1/06

Pastor and author Thabiti Anyabwile describes the beliefs and history of Islam, his own experience as a Muslim, the contradictions in the Koran, as well as the way for churches to approach evangelism with Muslims, which he calls an amazing, God-given opportunity the church has today.

Great Lessons from Great Men w/ Iain Murray: go to <http://resources.christianity.com/default/mrki.aspx>.

Post date: 9/1/06

In this interview, Reformed evangelical statesman and British author Iain Murray assesses the state of evangelicalism in Britain and America. What's the state of preaching today? Is hyper-Calvinism a threat? When do Calvinists become prejudiced in their thinking, and what does John Wesley have to teach them? Also, more Martyn Lloyd-Jones stories from this former Lloyd-Jones assistant!

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With a Little Help From My Friends

By Michael A. G. Haykin

Our culture is not one that provides great encouragement for the nurture and development of deep, long-lasting, satisfying friendships. Such friendships take time and sacrifice, and the busy world of the early twenty-first century West, as a rule, is far more interested in receiving and possessing than sacrificing and giving.[1]

What is especially disturbing is that western Christianity is little different from its culture. In C. S. Lewis's remarkable little commentary on spiritual warfare written from the devil's vantage point, *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis imagines one letter from a senior devil, Screwtape, to his nephew Wormwood in which Screwtape rejoices over the fact that "modern Christian writings" offer "few of the old warnings about Worldly Vanities, the Choice of Friends, and the Value of Time." [2] Lewis may or may not be right about the scarcity of Christian literature in the twentieth-century about "Worldly Vanities" and "the Value of Time." He is undoubtedly correct when it comes to the topic of friendship.

How different in this respect is our world from that of the ancients, both pagan and Christian. In the ancient world friendship was deemed so vitally important that the pagan philosopher Plato devoted an entire book, the *Lysis*, as well as substantial portions of two other books, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, to discussing its nature. Aristotle, the other leading thinker of the classical Greek period, occupied two of the ten books in his major work on ethical issues, *Nicomachean Ethics*, with a discussion of friendship. For the ancient Greeks, friendship formed one of the highest ideals of human life. This was also true of the Romans.

THE SCRIPTURES ON FRIENDSHIP

While two out of ten books of Scripture is not devoted to the concept of friendship, we do come across,

1. reflections on friendship like Ecclesiastes 4:7-12;
2. marvellous illustrations of what friendship should be like, as with Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan;
3. and nuggets of advice about having friends and keeping them in that Old Testament compendium of wisdom, Proverbs. For example, "a friend loves at all times" (Prov. 17:7).

These texts leave the impression that the Bible regards friendship as a very important part of life. Sure enough, the Bible uses two consistent images in its representation of friendship.[3]

1. The first is *the knitting of souls*. Deuteronomy provides the earliest mention of "a friend who is as your own soul" (Deut. 13:6)—that is, a companion of one's innermost thoughts and feelings, pointing to a concept of intimacy. This is well illustrated by Jonathan and David's friendship (for example, see 1 Sam. 18:1, 3-4).[4] Here we see ideas of strong emotional attachment and loyalty.[5] Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and Jesus present a New Testament example of this kind of friendship in John 11 (see esp. John 11:5, 11, 35-36). In fact, "friend" naturally becomes another name for believers or brothers in the Lord (see 3 John 15). The privileges and responsibilities of a biblical "soul mate," then, involve intimacy, loyalty, and a strong emotional attachment. Thus, it's only natural that Jesus would use the language of friendship to refer to our ultimate loyalties—and his (John 15:13-15)! Are we friends with the world, or God (James 2:23; 4:4)?
2. The second image that the Bible uses to represent friendship is *the face-to-face encounter*. This is the image used for Moses' relationship to God: in the tabernacle God spoke to Moses "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11; see also Numbers 12:8). The face-to-face image implies a conversation, a sharing of confidences, and, consequently, a meeting of minds, goals, and direction. In the New Testament, the apostle John tells a church that he's tired of writing, but hopes to visit and talk "face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (2 John 12). One of the benefits of face-to-face encounters between friends is the heightened insight that such encounters produce. A proverb that

highlights this idea is the famous one in Proverbs 27:17: "Iron sharpens iron, and one friend sharpens another."

FRIENDSHIP IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

It is instructive to observe that the spread of the church throughout the Roman Empire in the centuries immediately after the death and resurrection of Christ did not negate this rich appreciation of friendship. Despite the Christian emphasis on showing love to all men and women—family, friends, acquaintances, even enemies—friendship continued to be highly valued. In fact, the emphasis placed on the unity in Christ of all Christians encouraged a high degree of spiritual intimacy that resembled and even surpassed the intimacy considered by Graeco-Roman paganism to be essential to the experience of genuine friendship.[6]

Gregory of Nazianzus (c.329-389), a leading fourth-century Greek Christian theologian, could thus write of his friendship with Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379) during their time together as students in Athens in the 350s:

In studies, in lodgings, in discussions I had him as companion....We had all things in common...But above all it was God, of course, and a mutual desire for higher things, that drew us to each other. As a result we reached such a pitch of confidence that we revealed the depths of our hearts, becoming ever more united in our yearning.[7]

Given this estimation of friendship, it is no surprise that Gregory could also state, "If anyone were to ask me, 'What is the best thing in life?', I would answer, 'Friends'." [8]

In the Middle Ages, Ælred of Rievaulx (1110-1167), an English Cistercian monk, penned a classic on this subject, *Spiritual Friendship*. For Ælred, genuine friendship must "begin in Christ, continue in Christ, and be perfected in Christ." And such spiritual friendship is to be highly prized:

in human affairs nothing more sacred is striven for, nothing more useful is sought after, nothing more difficult is discovered, nothing more sweet experienced, and nothing more profitable possessed. For friendship bears fruit in this life and in the next.[9]

At the beginning of the modern era, John Calvin (1509-1564), who has had the undeserved reputation of being cold, harsh, and unloving, also had a rich appreciation of friendship. The French Reformed historian Richard Stauffer reckoned that there were few men at the time of the Reformation "who developed as many friendships" as Calvin.[10] Two of his closest friends were his fellow Reformers William Farel (1489-1565) and Pierre Viret (1511-1571). Calvin celebrated his friendship with these two men in his preface to his *Commentary on Titus*, where he stated,

I do not believe that there have ever been such friends who have lived together in such a deep friendship in their everyday style of life in this world as we have in our ministry. I have served here in the office of pastor with you two. There was never any appearance of envy; it seems to me that you two and I were as one person....And we have shown through visible witness and good authority before men that we have among us no other understanding or friendship than that which has been dedicated to the name of Christ, has been to the present time of profit to his church, and has no other purpose but that all may be one in him with us.[11]

This brotherly friendship is expressed in the correspondence of these three men. Extant are 163 letters from Calvin to Farel, 137 from Farel to Calvin, 204 from Calvin to Viret, and 185 from Viret to Calvin. Not only do they frankly discuss theological problems and ecclesiastical matters, they demonstrate much openness about the problems of their private lives.

To note but one example: On January 27, 1552, Calvin wrote to Farel and chided him for reports that he had heard—true reports one must add—about the undue length of Farel's sermons. "You have often confessed," Calvin reminds his friend, "that you know this is a fault and that you would like to correct it." Calvin went on to encourage Farel to shorten his sermons, lest Satan use Farel's failing in this regard to destroy the many good things being produced by his ministry.

TWO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND FRIENDS

The importance of friendship in the Christian life continued to be intensely experienced and discussed in the early part of the modern era. Esther Burr (1732-1758), who lived in colonial New Jersey, unequivocally declared, "Nothing is more refreshing to the soul (except communication with God himself), than the company and society of a friend." [12] As the mother of two children and the wife of Aaron Burr, the president of what eventually became Princeton University, Esther earnestly sought to know the presence of God in the hurly-burly of her daily life. As she did, she came to appreciate the fact that friends are a divine gift. Writing in her diary on January 23, 1756, she was convinced that "'Tis...a great mercy that we have any friends—What would this world be without 'em—A person who looks upon himself to be friendless must of all Cretures be missarable in this Life—Tis the Life of Life." [13] For Esther, friends were one of this world's greatest sources of happiness. Why did she value friendship so highly? Surely because she realized that Christian friends and conversation with friends are vital for spiritual growth.

Similar convictions are found in something she wrote the previous year on April 20, 1755, to her best friend named Sarah Prince:

I should highly value (as you my dear do) such *charming friends* as you have about *you—friends* that one might unbosom their whole soul too....I esteem *relegious Conversation* one of the best helps to keep up relection in the soul, excepting secret devotion, I dont know but the very best—Then what a lamentable thing that tis so neglected by Gods own children.[14]

Notice the connection between friendship and what Esther calls "relegious conversation." For the Christian, true friends are those with whom one can share the deepest things of one's life. They are people with whom one can be transparent and open. In Esther's words, they are people to whom one can "unbosom [one's] whole soul." And in the course of conversation about spiritual things the believer can find strength and encouragement for living the Christian life. In referring to spiritual conversation with friends as "one of the best helps to keep up relection in the soul," Esther obviously views it as a means of grace, one of the ways that God the Holy Spirit keeps Christians in fellowship with the Savior.

These convictions regarding friendship were challenged the following year, when one of the college tutors, a Mr. Ewing, told Esther that "he did not think women knew what friendship was," since they "were hardly capable of anything so cool and rational as friendship." Esther lost no time in rubbing his views. As she wrote in her diary, "I retorted several severe things upon him before he had time to speak again. He blushed and seemed confused...we carried on the dispute for an hour—I talked him quite silent." [15] Esther had evidently learned much from living in the house and under the tutelage of the greatest American theologian of the century, her father, Jonathan Edwards.

TWO BAPTIST FRIENDS

Another excellent illustration of a biblical friendship is that of John Ryland Jr. (1753-1825) and Andrew Fuller (1754-1815). From 1781 to 1793, Ryland was involved in the pastoral leadership of College Lane Baptist Church with his father, John Ryland Sr. (d.1792) in Northampton. In 1793 Ryland Jr. was called to be the pastor of Broadmead Baptist Church in Bristol, England, as well as the principal of Bristol Baptist Academy, and held both positions concurrently. He stayed in these offices till his death in 1825.[16] All of the institutions in which Ryland served were part of the Calvinistic Baptist denomination in Great Britain, the major Baptist grouping of that era.

Among Ryland's life-long friends, his closest was Andrew Fuller. Fuller was born in Wicken, a small agricultural village in Cambridgeshire.[17] His parents Robert Fuller (1723-1781) and Philippa Gunton (1726-1816) were farmers who rented a succession of dairy farms. In 1761 his parents moved a short distance to Soham, where he and his family began to regularly attend the local Calvinistic Baptist church, and where Fuller was converted in November 1769. After being baptized the following spring, he became a member of the Soham church. In 1774 Fuller was called to the pastorate of this church. He stayed until 1782, when he became the pastor of the Calvinistic Baptist congregation at Kettering.

His time as a pastor in Soham was decisive for shaping Fuller's theological perspective. It was during this period that he began a life-long study of the works of the American divine Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). This study, along with his commitment to live under the authority of the infallible Scriptures,[18] enabled him to become what his close friend John Ryland Jr. described as "perhaps the most judicious and able theological writer that ever belonged to our denomination." [19] Succeeding generations have confirmed Ryland's estimation of his friend. The Victorian Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) once described Fuller as the "greatest theologian" of his century, while the twentieth-century Baptist historian A.C. Underwood said that "he was the soundest and most creatively useful theologian the Particular Baptists have ever had." [20] David Phillips, a nineteenth-century Welsh biographer, may have put it best when he called Fuller "the elephant of Kettering," an allusion to his weighty theological influence.[21] He also served as the first Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, founded in 1792, from its inception until his death in 1815.

Ryland and Fuller first met in 1778 when both of them were young men and were wrestling with a number of extremely important theological issues. Within a year they became the closest of friends. After Fuller moved to Kettering in 1782 the two of them had frequent opportunities to talk, to pray, and to spend time together, since Northampton and Kettering are only thirteen miles apart. Their friendship would remain unbroken for the next thirty-seven years, till Fuller's death in 1815.

Nine days before he died, Fuller asked one last request of Ryland: would he preach his funeral sermon? Ryland agreed, though it was no easy task for him to hold back his tears as he spoke. Towards the end of this sermon, Ryland reminisced about the fact that their friendship had "never met with one minute's interruption, by one unkind word or thought, of which I have any knowledge," and that the wound caused by the loss of "this most faithful and judicious friend" was something that would never be healed in this life.

THE COST OF FRIENDSHIP

The year following Fuller's death, Ryland published a biography of his close friend. In the introduction, he stated the following about their friendship:

Most of our common acquaintances are well aware, that I was his oldest and most intimate friend; and though my removal to Bristol, above twenty years ago, placed us at a distance from each other, yet a constant correspondence was all along maintained; and, to me at least, it seemed a tedious interval, if more than a fortnight elapsed without my receiving a letter from him.

When Ryland moved to Bristol in 1793 he was no longer close enough to his friend in Kettering for them to meet on a regular basis. The only way that they could keep their friendship alive and intact was through the medium of the letter. Thus, for more than twenty years, they faithfully corresponded with one another. Ryland notes that if he did not hear from Fuller at least once every two weeks he found the time gap "tedious." Both Ryland and Fuller knew that their friendship was a fragile treasure that could be easily lost or neglected in the unpredictable business of life if they did not give it the attention it needed. As the American preacher Haddon Robinson has recently noted, "Even strong friendships require watering or they shrivel up and blow away."

FRIENDSHIP—WARTS AND ALL

What had initially attracted Ryland and Fuller to one another was the discovery that they shared "a strong attachment to the same religious principles, a decided aversion to the same errors, a predilection for the same authors," in particular, Jonathan Edwards. In other words, they had that fundamental aspect of a good friendship: a union of hearts. They found deep joy in their oneness of soul—their passion for the glory of Christ and the extension of his kingdom. But friends are not Siamese twins or clones of one another. It belongs to the essence of genuine friendship that friends accept one another for what they are, warts and all. And they give one another room to disagree.

In the case of Ryland and Fuller, their main difference of opinion revolved around an extremely volatile issue among eighteenth-century English-speaking Baptists: the issue of open and closed communion, and open and closed membership. In the eighteenth century the vast majority of pastors and congregations in the Calvinistic Baptist denomination, including Fuller, adhered to a policy of closed membership (only baptized believers could

become members of their local churches) and closed communion (only baptized believers could partake of the Lord's Supper in their meeting-houses). Ryland, on the other hand, was of the conviction that both the Lord's Supper and membership in the local church should be open to all Christians, regardless of whether they had been baptized as believers. He was thus committed to a policy of both open communion and open membership.

When Ryland was the pastor of the College Lane Church in Northampton, for instance, one of the leading deacons of the church, a certain Thomas Trinder, did not receive believer's baptism until six years after he had been appointed deacon. Fuller would never have tolerated such a situation in the church that he pastored in Kettering. But the two men were secure enough in their friendship to disagree and not have it destroy their relationship.

The only time that this theological difference really came close to disturbing their friendship was in connection with the Baptist Missionary Society's mission at Serampore, India. Headed by William Carey, William Ward, and Joshua Marshman, all of whom were friends of Ryland and Fuller, this mission adopted a policy of open communion in 1805. Writing to Fuller that year, the Serampore missionaries informed him they had come to the conviction that "no one has a right to debar a true Christian from the Lord's table, nor refuse to communicate with a real Christian in commemorating the death of their common Lord, without being guilty of a breach of the Law of Love." "We cannot doubt," they went on to affirm, "whether a Watts, an Edwards, a Brainerd, a Doddridge, a Whitefield, did right in partaking of the Lord's Supper, though really unbaptized, or whether they had the presence of God at the Lord's Table?"

Fuller was deeply disturbed by this reasoning and the decision made by the Serampore missionaries, and exerted all of his powers of influence and reasoning to convince them to embrace closed communion, which they eventually did in 1811. Ryland, though, was not slow to criticize this reversal of policy. But, as he later said of his disagreement with Fuller, "I repeatedly expressed myself more freely and strongly to him, than I did to any man in England; yet without giving him offence."

We are all subject to the temptation to make our views about secondary matters far more important than they actually are, and to squeeze our friends into our own mold when it comes to these non-essential issues. Fuller and Ryland, on the other hand, genuinely knew how to give each other space to disagree on what many of their Baptist acquaintances regarded as an all-essential issue. In so doing, they revealed that they were seeking to shape their friendship along the lines of that old adage, "In things essential, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

THE ONE ESSENTIAL FRIENDSHIP

When Fuller lay dying in April, 1815, he was asked if he wanted to see Ryland, his oldest living friend. His response was terse: "He can do me no good." His reply seems to be an odd statement, lacking in appreciation for what their long friendship had meant to the two men. But it needs to be understood in context. In his final letter to Ryland, Fuller had begun by saying, "We have enjoyed much together, which I hope will prove an earnest of greater enjoyment in another world....[There] I trust we shall meet, and part no more." Clearly, his feelings about his friendship with Ryland had undergone no alteration whatsoever. In the light of his impending death, however, there was only one friendship which he knew to be needful in that moment: his friendship with the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As another eighteenth-century writer, an Anglican rector by the name of James Newton, had written when faced with the death of his brother, "If we have God for our Friend, what need we to fear, Nothing, but without his Friendship we may be looked on as the most miserable of Men."

1. Diogenes Allen, *Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, Friendship* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1987), 45-46.
2. *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter 10 in *The Best of C. S. Lewis* (Washington, D.C.: Canon Press, 1969), 43.
3. "Friendship", *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, eds. Leland Ryken *et al.* (Downers Grove, Illinois/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 308-309.
4. Also note 1 Samuel 23:16-18.
5. R. Paul Stevens, "Friendship" in Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens, eds., *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 439.
6. Carolinne White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 57.
7. *De vita sua* 225ff. [trans. Denise Molaise Meehan, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: Three Poems* (The Fathers of the Church, vol. 75; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 83-84].
8. Cited in White, *Christian Friendship*, 70.
9. *Spiritual Friendship* 1.9; 2.9 [trans. Mary Eugenia Laker (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 53, 71].
10. *The Humanness of John Calvin*, trans. George H. Shriver (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 47.

11. Cited Stauffer, *Humanness of Calvin*, 57.
12. *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757*, eds. Carol F. Karlsen and Laurie Crumpacker (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1984), 185.
13. *Journal of Esther Edwards Burr*, 185.
14. *Journal of Esther Edwards Burr*, 112.
15. *Journal of Esther Edwards Burr*, 257.
16. On Ryland's life, not much has been written. For an overview, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *A Cloud of Witnesses: Calvinistic Baptists in the 18th century* (ET Perspectives, No.3; Darlington, [Co. Durham]: Evangelical Times, 2006), 45-51. See also the older studies of J. E. Ryland, "Memoir" in *Pastoral Memorials: Selected from the Manuscripts of the Late Revd. John Ryland, D.D.* (London: B. J. Holdsworth, 1826), I, 1-56 and James Culross, *The Three Rylands: A Hundred Years of various Christian Service* (London: Elliott Stock, 1897), 67-91.
17. For Fuller's life, the classic study is that of John Ryland, *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope Illustrated; in the Life and Death of the Reverend Andrew Fuller* (London: Button & Son, 1816). A second edition of this biography appeared in 1818. For more recent studies, see Arthur H. Kirkby, *Andrew Fuller (1754-1815)* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1961) and Phil Roberts, "Andrew Fuller" in Timothy George and David S. Dockery, eds., *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 121-139.
18. For example, he could state: "If any man venerate the authority of Scripture, he must receive it as being what it professes to be, and for all the purposes for which it professes to be written. If the Scriptures profess to be Divinely inspired, and assume to be the infallible standard of faith and practice, we must either receive them as such, or, if we would be consistent, disown the writers as imposters" [*The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared, as to their Moral Tendency in The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher (1845 ed.; repr. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), II, 196].
19. *The Indwelling and Righteousness of Christ no Security against Corporeal Death, but the Source of Spiritual and Eternal Life* (London, 1815), 2-3.
20. The Spurgeon remark is taken from Gilbert Laws, *Andrew Fuller: Pastor, Theologian, Ropeholder* (London: Carey Press, 1942), 127. See also A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: The Baptist Union Publication Dept. (Kingsgate Press), 1947), 166.
21. *Memoir of the Life, Labors, and Extensive Usefulness of the Rev. Christmas Evans* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1843), 74.

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Befriending Timothy

By Owen Strachan

The universe operates according to a cause-and-effect framework. When matter is acted upon, change happens. When a match is struck, fire flares. When food cooks, hungry stomachs grumble. And when a pastor befriends a young man, the kingdom advances.

This last equation might seem simplistic. But God doesn't need us to conduct mass evangelistic rallies or dream up growth plans with S-curves. He simply calls wise men of God to befriend young men and disciple them for ministry. When God's shepherds invest in young Christian men by befriending them, the young men will be transformed. When they are transformed, they are hungry to minister to others.

In what follows, we will consider the biblical picture of invested friendship, a personal testimony of such friendship, and then a few practical principles. As a Timothy, I hope that these words will be used to encourage you to invest in young men in your local church.

TWO BIBLICAL PICTURES OF INVESTED FRIENDSHIP: CHRIST AND PAUL

The gospels clearly communicate the idea that Jesus befriended and loved his apostles. As the apostle John describes the scene in which Jesus predicts Judas' betrayal, John sets the stage by writing, "there was reclining on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23). John often used the phrase "the disciple whom Jesus loved" to describe himself (John 19:26-27, 20:2-9; 21:1, 20-23). This is telling. Jesus was not an austere lecturer or an emotionally distant preacher. He was a personal friend of his disciples to the point that they were assured of his love. He relaxed with them, letting them rest against his chest. He traveled with them. He preached with them. He cried with them. And he shared joy with them. This was deep, soul-shaping friendship. It was the kind that every young man desires, and few young men receive.

The apostle Paul understood that it was his responsibility to follow in Christ's footsteps. We get a glimpse of his love for Timothy in the opening verses of 2 Timothy. The very context of this letter is moving. Paul, the apostle who suffered so powerfully for the gospel of Christ, was soon to die, and it seems that he knew this. In the first seven verses of this second letter to Timothy, Paul pours out his love for his disciple. In verse two, he calls Timothy his "beloved son." In verse three, he says that he "constantly remembers [Timothy] in his prayers night and day." In verse four, he says that he is "longing to see" Timothy, whom he "recall[s] with tears," because he wants "to be filled with joy." Like Christ, Paul shows great affection for his disciple. Like Christ, Paul's discipleship of Timothy transcended mere education. Like Christ, Paul did not simply befriend Timothy, but cherished him. Paul's example should drive us past the meaningless, the ordinary, and the polite and bring us to the demanding, expensive work of invested friendship.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON INVESTED FRIENDSHIP

It is special to be trained by a godly pastor. It is even more special to be befriended by a godly pastor.

I speak as one who was befriended by a pastor some years ago. Like Christ and Paul, this man loved me. Our relationship was not complex. It was not based on a unique, non-transferrable model. He simply befriended me and invested in me over a period of time. He invited me over to his study and talked with me. He listened to my frustrations about women. He poked fun at me. He gave me insightful advice about jobs. He let me join him in his study while he worked on sermons (I did my own work). He took me on walks on which we reflected together on a number of things—his family, his burdens, his joys. He disciplined me, yes, but he did so through friendship.

As a Timothy, I have benefited immeasurably from having a man to learn from, to work beside, and to share the experiences of life. My future ministry will be sharpened and honed by more experiences in days to come, but the foundation was set by the invested friendship of my former pastor.

Pastor, let me encourage you to befriend possible future shepherds in your congregation. Your friendship, alongside efforts to personally train them for ministry, will transform them. It will assist them long after the textbooks and lecture notes are forgotten.

PRACTICAL PRINCIPALS FOR INVESTED FRIENDSHIP

There are a few principles that, when put into practice, may help you in your work to befriend your disciple.

1. Invite them to work with you

Pastors should bring other men into their everyday working life. From watching my pastor prepare sermons, and interacting with him intermittently as he went, I learned to prepare my own. From listening to him give counsel, I learned to counsel. From watching him run meetings, I learned to administer effectively. Watching how my pastor work taught me how to work and brought much enjoyment and counsel to me.

2. Invite them to relax with you

In discipleship, pastors are teaching their charges a lifestyle. Your disciple needs to have fun with you, relax with you, do boring things with you like run errands. I learned how to be discerning with media, in part, from the way my former pastor dealt with movies and television. I've learned how to play basketball with grace from competing with one of my elders. All told, I've learned at least as many lessons outside of the office as I have in it.

3. Show them genuine passion

Young people are passionate and attracted to passion, sincerity, or earnestness. I'm not saying that every pastor needs to have an effusive personality. But young men will connect with pastors who clearly love their work and believe it's meaningful. They will also benefit when pastors communicate passion or strong conviction for the work of discipleship and the future ministry of their charges. It was in part the passion of my pastor that gave me passion in my life and ministry. Passion and sincerity have a way of rubbing off on people, especially those close to us.

4. Show them genuine kindness

Pastors should show great kindness to their charges. Pastoral discipleship presents a special opportunity to pastors to dish out huge helpings of kindness to another person. My pastor was unfailingly kind to me. He won my devotion and respect as a result, and gave me a model for my own life.

5. Show them genuineness

The young people of today are trained to be cynical. We have grown up amidst the weeds of hypocrisy and deceit. The pastor who speaks honestly about his fears, struggles, hopes, and joys places himself in a position to build a strong friendship with his disciple. My pastor talked honestly with me. I never doubted whether he was being genuine or not. As a result, a strong trust was forged.

CONCLUDING WORDS

Pastor, invested friendship is no small thing. This work will involve sacrifice and devotion. Yet the result, should you live to see it, will be worth far more than you ever calculated. Let the simple calculus of the universe lead you on when your motivation wanes and the hours grow long. When a pastor befriends a young man, the kingdom advances.

May it go far through your efforts.

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Using Small Groups to Fight Sin

By Corby Megorden

My natural tendency is to say to those around me, "I'm doing quite well, thanks." The problem is, sin is active and wars against us each and every day. It's unwise—and, frankly, dishonest—to suggest that I don't need help in my battle against sin. Often, I can put an accurate label on my sin patterns, and even identify verses that speak to them. But just as often, there are sins and sin patterns I cannot see.

The care group to which my wife and I belong at our church in Gaithersburg, Maryland comes alongside and helps me fight the battle. They help me to see my sin, and then apply the gospel of Jesus Christ to it.

"And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thes. 5:14).

By reminding me of his all-sufficient sacrifice, my care groups admonishes me when I am idle, encourages me when I am fainthearted, and helps me where I am weak. This is bringing grace in an appropriate form—according to our needs at the moment.

The care group I lead consists of three married couples. All six of us meet monthly. The three husbands also meet separately once a month, as do the three wives. Since all three of us men work on the pastoral staff at our church, we are able to drop into one another's offices to care for each another on a regular basis. Yet in our care groups we meet as friends, not as coworkers or professionals.

Though we periodically read an article to enrich our marriages, primarily we focus on learning to apply what we have been taught from the pulpit. The major emphasis of our discussions is simple: "how does what we have been taught affect my life?" That means our conversation will bring the message of the sermon into personal heart struggles, into day-to-day decisions such as whether our kids go to college, into our latest conflicts, or into evidences of grace in one another's lives.

Our goal is not to measure each other's performance; it's to give care and be grace-bringers. There is an underlying assumption of trust, as well as the assumption that we continue to be sinners in need of a Savior today. In this context, we don't try to "out-perform" one another, but to truly know each other and be known by each other.

Given this context of trust, we will openly discuss almost any topic as couples (with the exception of matters pertaining to sexual temptation, which will be discussed in our same-sex meetings). Discussing our lives with spouses present is immensely helpful in caring for one another, since it allows the group to get the perspective of the person who knows each individual best. Without such input, we are less equipped to help one another. Additional benefits of meeting as married couples include

- allowing individual's to hear how sin affects others in the family. The individual may not be aware of the consequences of his or her sin, and the group might be able to facilitate a conversation or offer a perspective that leads to a level of shared understanding the couple cannot reach on their own.
- letting the group point out evidences of grace in an individual's life, evidences which the spouse may not have seen.
- allowing an individual to hear how a spouse sees God changing him or her (often to the surprise of the husband/wife).
- helping spouses be more effective at caring for one another. By observing others care for our spouse, we learn how to more effectively do the same.
- providing conversation topics which can be picked up in our separate meetings for men and women.

Every Christian has predominant sin patterns that affect our lives. For myself, I can be self-sufficient, judgmental, and proud. These sins reside deep in my heart. While these sins may show up in primary areas such as my marriage, they really affect all of my actions. Because "out of the heart, the mouth speaks," our discussions reflect my heart and what I truly believe. Every conversation is then an opportunity for others to see my sin patterns at work. By having others that know me share these observations, I can more effectively mortify the sin that is active in my heart. And what a joy to do this with brothers and sisters who know, believe, trust, and always remind me of the same gospel—that Christ died for our sins, that we might belong to sin no more!

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Using Small Groups to Cultivate Fellowship

By Michael Lawrence

A lot of churches these days are building their ministries through small groups. How do we employ small groups at our church in Washington, DC?

OUR VISION FOR SMALL GROUPS

We view small groups as a means of allowing the congregation to shepherd and disciple each other, within the bounds of pastoral oversight (Eph. 4:f11-13). They facilitate relationships for mutual edification.

They are not support or counseling groups, and they are not pure study groups. Rather, they are used to cultivate spiritual fellowship together, a fellowship informed by Scripture and pursued through prayer, study, and interpersonal reflection.

In a very real, but informal way, small group leaders are tasked with an extension of the elders' pastoral ministry—the encouragement, exhortation, and building up of a particular group of people in the church.

WHAT ROLE DO THEY PLAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CONGREGATION?

In thinking about discipleship, it's helpful to think of a spectrum, with the whole congregation at one end, one on one relationships at the other, and small groups in the middle.

CONGREGATION — SMALL GROUPS — ONE ON ONE RELATIONSHIPS

On the one hand, our church attempts to prioritize the gatherings of the whole congregation, because that's where the primary teaching is done and where the entire body, with all its diverse parts, most reflects the gospel of Christ. On the other hand, we recognize how effective individual discipleship can be. In between these two ends of the spectrum, we have small groups working to connect the benefits of our ministry to the whole congregation and the ministry going on between individuals. Small groups provide the context in which what the church is learning as a whole can be applied more individually and deliberately. It's the context in which members can pray and spur one another on to evangelism. It's the context for facilitating discipleship relationships.

We are not a cell church in which the entire membership is organized into a pyramid of small groups with staff and elders at the top. Nor do we, in most cases, employ small groups as our way of doing target ministry to particular groups of people (there are several exceptions; see the section on "structure" below). Instead, most of our groups are "general community groups," so that every group looks more like a microcosm of the whole church. We want the culture of the whole to be reflected in the parts.

Very often in churches, community is seen as an end, or goal, and small groups are the means to achieve that end. We understand community to be both a by-product of and a means to foster individual discipleship. Therefore, we have tried to think of small group ministry not as a ministry to groups with the aim of producing good groups. Instead, we have approached small group ministry as a ministry to individuals, in the context of community, with the aim of producing faithful Christians.

We take care to ensure that small groups are neither a substitute nor a competitor with the church as a whole. Rather, they are an extension of it, a particularization of the whole community. This is particularly important in today's church culture, where many Christians are accustomed to thinking of the small group, rather than the

church, as their primary spiritual community. It's possible to be a biblical Christian without belonging to a small group. It's impossible to be one without belonging to a church.

HOW DOES AN INDIVIDUAL JOIN A SMALL GROUP?

At the end of every membership interview with me or one of the other pastors, we ask member candidates if they want to join a small group. We then have one of our pastoral assistants identify an appropriate group, contact the small group leader, and ask the leader—space permitting—to invite the new member.

If a church member who does not belong to a small group decides suddenly to join one, we simply direct them to that same pastoral assistant.

In short, small group participation is encouraged, but not required. Furthermore, if someone indicates that he or she is able to participate in either a small group or the church-wide Wednesday evening Bible study, but not both due to the constraints of time, we would encourage that person to join us for the church-wide study.

HOW ARE SMALL GROUPS STRUCTURED?

With the exception of groups based on gender or devoted to couples in their first two years of marriage, all our groups are open to anyone. We recognize the benefits single-sex groups can have in facilitating a healthy vulnerability and accountability, especially for the large number of singles in our church. And young married groups led by older married couples can be used to help newlyweds put their marriage on good biblical ground. But beyond that, we are hesitant to particularize much further, since we want our church members to understand—as we continually remind them!—that one of the gospel's first implications in our lives is learning to love people who are not like us.

Small groups are limited only by the capacity of the meeting place and the ability of the leader. Groups generally have a leader and co-leader, the former discipling and preparing the latter for leadership. And groups typically meet weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly, depending on the schedules of its members.

Small group leaders are given a lot of freedom in deciding how to use the time. They might choose to study a book of the Bible or a book on Christian living. There are a number of books that our church constantly recommends as good for Christians to read, which our leaders often use. Or leaders might decide to use the time to review and make more individualized applications from Sunday's sermon. Whatever they do, we simply ask them to get a pastor's approval first—and to be open to his suggestions.

WHAT EXPECTATIONS DO WE HAVE OF LEADERS AND MEMBERS?

We expect the following of small group leaders. They must

- be members in good standing;
- regularly attend both Sunday services, since our Sunday evening service is quite different than the morning service and dedicated to the fellowship, evangelistic activity, and prayer life of the whole congregation. It's hard to stay up on the life of our church without being at both, and we do not want to hold up people as leaders and models who are unable or unwilling to make this a priority;
- be prepared to study and prepare content coordinated and approved by a pastor;
- communicate regularly with the church office about pastoral issues;
- be willing to create an open culture, and accept new members;
- generally care for the group;
- facilitate discipling relationships;
- attend quarterly training events.

We expect the following of small group members. They must

- be a member in good standing (or in the process of joining);

- not avoid whole church gatherings, using the small group as a substitute for church;
- regularly attend and participate.

HOW DO WE TRAIN SMALL GROUP LEADERS?

Every quarter, we hold a small group training session, each of which is devoted to a particular topic. The types of topics which would be covered include

- how to lead an inductive Bible study,
- how to build community;
- how to facilitate discipling relationships;
- how to lead a book study;
- small group evangelism and mission;
- how to raise up new leaders.

Once a year, we also lay out our overall vision for small groups at a special appreciation luncheon for the leaders.

WHAT ABOUT NON-CHRISTIANS AND NON-MEMBERS?

Our church also offers evangelistic small groups for non-Christians. These typically involve a study through the Gospel of Mark.

As for non-members, we are happy for our church members to organize their own Bible studies, for instance, with other Christians at their work place who belong to other churches. Yet we would not count that small group as something our church does, insofar as it would be outside of our pastoral oversight.

It's worth adding, however, that we deliberately do not allow individuals who attend our church, but who won't join the church for one reason or another, to participate in our small groups. We have adopted this stand because we believe that the ministry and life of the church as a whole is that important in a Christian's life. We don't want to do anything that facilitates this kind of casual, non-committal attendance. Rather, we encourage friends like these to find a church where they can formally commit to the entire church as a member, and then join a small group in that church.

CONCLUSION

As a church grows, small group leaders increasingly do important ministry and pastoral care. Less and less is it possible for staff elders, or even all the elders, to know everyone in the church. It's tempting to think that all the small group leaders put together could know everyone. But even they can't. Rather, small group leaders have the privilege to help facilitate and equip the only group in the congregation that *can* adequately shepherd the whole congregation, and that's the congregation itself.

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A Meal Says More Than You Think: A Biblical Theology of Hospitality

By Jonathan Leeman

A couple years ago, I was asked to do a three minute devotion on hospitality. That sounded like a good project. I knew that hospitality is mentioned several times in the New Testament, and it was a subject to which I had never given much thought. Yet I was grateful that other folks at church on the "hospitality committee" stir the lemonade and put out the cookies every Sunday. Perhaps I could put some theology behind the lemonade and cookies.

The English dictionary defines hospitality as "the friendly treatment of guests or strangers; an act or show of welcome." That's not too far from how the New Testament Greek word (*philo-xenia*) breaks down—love of strangers.[1] Lemonade and cookies invite strangers to stay. A snack communicates to newcomers, "You are welcome here!" Great, this was going to be an easy devotion.

BEGINNING WITH A WORD SEARCH

Still, I wanted to know if the Bible says anything further about hospitality. The easiest way to begin was to pullout the concordance and look up New Testament occurrences for the word "hospitality" or "hospitable." Doing this, I only found seven uses of the word in our English Bibles. But what I found sent me beyond a word search; indeed, it sent me well beyond lemonade and cookies.

I began with Romans 12:13: "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." This command is fairly straightforward. Christians are commanded to show hospitality to one another. Commentators like to point out that staying in inns in the ancient Near East was not always desirable. So traveling Christians like Paul were dependent on the hospitality of churches.

What struck me even more, however, was the argument of Romans 12 leading up to this command. In verses 1 and 2, Paul commands Christians to present our bodies as living sacrifices. The following verses that explain how this is actually done. Verses 3 to 8 describe how Christians live distinctly from the world within the context of the church community. Every Christian must use his or her individual gifts to serve the body. Verse 9 onward provides a list of attributes that should mark what makes every individual Christian life distinct: genuine love, brotherly affection, fervency in spirit, patience, prayerful, and, eventually, showing hospitality. Apparently, hospitality is a basic of the Christian faith. It is part of how we present our bodies as spiritual sacrifices.

I then turned to 1 Timothy 3:1-3 (or Titus 1:8), where Paul instructs Timothy on what must characterize elders, or pastors, in the church. Verse 2 says an elder must be hospitable. Next, he says an elder must be able to teach. That's interesting. Teaching comes after hospitality. What does that say about the importance of hospitality? It says it's pretty important. If you are an elder in a church, or you aspire to be an elder, do you also aspire to being hospitable? Your hospitality should be exemplary for the entire congregation.

By flipping a couple of pages to 1 Timothy 5:3-10, I could see that hospitality is not only required of elders, it is required of the older women in a church who are called to set an example for younger women.

Finally, I turned to 1 Peter 4:7-11, where Peter utters these startling words, "The end of all things is near." It's a statement that begs the question, "If the end is coming, what are we to do?" Peter's answer is straight forward: "Above all, love each other deeply." Then he says to do this in two ways: First, everyone should "show hospitality to one another without grumbling." Second, everyone should "use whatever gift he has received to serve others." We do these things, moreover, "so that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (esv).

Once more, the flow of the argument is worth meditating on. If someone were to say to me, "The world is ending very soon. What are you going to do?" I'm not confident that the first words out of my mouth would be, "Offer

hospitality." By the same token, if someone said to me, "How will God glorify himself through Christ?" I am not sure that "the hospitality of God's people" would make my list.

So here I was, tasked with giving a three minute devotion on hospitality, but finding myself overwhelmed *not* by the number of times the word is used, but by the contexts in which it is located: Romans 12 and *the basics of the Christian life*; 1 Timothy and a *necessary attribute of church leaders, male and female*; 1 Peter 4 and *how to prepare for the end times*. Amazing. My word search prompted me to ask, why is hospitality so important in Scripture? To answer that, I had to dig a little deeper. More than a word search, I needed a biblical theology of hospitality.[2]

OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, hospitality is closely connected with a recognition of God's lordship and covenant loyalty. In Genesis 18, Abraham entertains three guests, one of whom is the Lord. And the Lord promises Abraham a son. So hospitality is often associated with promise and blessing.

In Genesis 19, Lot protects his two guests from the townsmen who surround the house and make threats. Here, hospitality is associated with protection. Similarly, Rahab offers protection and lodging to Israelite spies in Joshua 2, demonstrating her loyalty to Israel's God. Abigail provides hospitality to David and his men in 1 Samuel 25. The widow of Zerephath provides hospitality for Elijah when facing starvation herself in 1 Kings 17, prompting God to provide for her.

Again and again, acts of hospitality or inhospitality reveal the good or evil of a person or a community (Gen. 19, Judg. 19, 1 Sam. 25). Incidentally, the same is true in the New Testament. Hospitality is a characteristic of those who live as God intends. Think about which parable of Jesus' uses hospitality to indicate who fulfills the command to love and who does not: the parable of the good Samaritan.

But hospitality has a larger place in the Old Testament than just these individual examples....

Consider Abraham of Ur called out of the homeland of his fathers in order to travel to a foreign land that God has promised (Gen. 12:1-3).

Consider Joseph sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt.

Consider the Israelites, who become so numerous the Egyptians treated these "foreigners" as slaves.

Consider Moses leading these strangers, these aliens, through the wilderness for forty years, forced to live on God's miraculous provision of quail and manna.

Consider Judah's exile in Babylon.

Consider Daniel opening the windows of his room toward Jerusalem as he prayed, a holy man in a strange land.

In short, Israel's identity was continually formed and reformed through the experience of being a stranger and a sojourner, stuck in a temporary place, never quite at home, vulnerable to others, and always having to live according to God's provision. Does this sound familiar? Like the Christian life perhaps? I'll discuss this more in a moment. But again and again, God demonstrated he would provide everything the nation needed to survive. So Israel's status as sojourners and aliens functioned as both a reminder of their ultimate dependence on God and therefore as a basis for their gratitude, obedience, and hope in him.

Their experience of being foreigners was also essential in helping them understand the needs of strangers in their midst. They received the hospitality of God, which in turn taught them to turn and offer that same hospitality to others. Hence, Israel was the only ancient Near Eastern country with laws protecting the stranger and alien (Ex. 23:9, Deut. 10:19). Judges were commanded to deal impartially between aliens and Israelites (Dt. 1:16, 24:17). Cities of refuge were open to aliens and native-borns alike (Num. 35:15; Josh. 20:9). Sojourners were often

classed with widows, orphans, and the poor as deserving the community's provision and just treatment (Ex. 22:21-24, Dt. 24:17-18).

In these laws, we see something of God's own heart. We might ask ourselves whether our hearts are like God's. Do we have compassion for the outsider and alien, for the new and unadjusted?

NEW TESTAMENT

When we move to the New Testament, the importance of hospitality becomes even more prominent, and we see it in at least five specific areas.

The Incarnation

First, the idea of Christian hospitality is inextricably linked to the doctrine of the incarnation. God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, became a guest or stranger in the world. When God became man in Christ, he entered humanity as an alien or a stranger. He then lived his life in such a way that he was always dependent on the hospitality of others. Jesus experienced the vulnerability and rejection of a stranger.

Luke 2:7: "They wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for him in the inn."

Luke 9:58: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

As he and his disciples traveled through Judea and Samaria, they were dependent on the hospitality of others (Matt. 10:11ff; Luke 10:5ff). (So too with the apostles: cf. Acts 10:6, 18, 32, 48; 16:15, 34; 17:7; 18:2f, etc.)

Love for Christ

On a related note, practicing hospitality, especially toward Christians, is one way a Christian shows love to Christ himself. Consider *Matthew 25:31-46*, where Jesus explicitly identifies himself as "stranger" (*xenos*). Jesus divides the sheep from the goats, and he says to the sheep, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." But to the goats, he says the opposite. Hospitality toward fellow saints, even "the least of these my brothers," is a demonstration of love toward him. Those who welcome fellow saints and meet their needs when they are in distress have welcomed and ministered to Christ himself.

God's Grace in Salvation

Third, the idea of Christian hospitality is inextricably linked to God's grace in salvation. Consider Jesus' own practice of welcoming the lost and eating with people who ordinarily would have been excluded from fellowship. Not only that, Jesus' teaching on hospitality is distinctive in its emphasis on welcoming those who have nothing to give in return.

Luke 14:12-14: "He said also to the man who had invited him, 'When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.'"

Rather than inviting those who can repay, Jesus said we should invite the poor, the needy, and those generally unable to repay us. After all, God is gracious to welcome miserable beggars to the feast in his kingdom. The prophet Isaiah describes the work of the suffering servant in chapter 53, and then he extends an invitation in chapter 55 to everyone who wishes to enjoy the fruits of the suffering servant's work: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Is. 55:1).

By practicing hospitality, especially among non-Christians, we demonstrate the very character of the God who has invited deeply-indebted sinners to the eternal feast of salvation. In that sense, we provide a living picture of the gospel. No, it is not *the* gospel. It is a small picture that both points toward, and draws the heart of the recipient toward, *the* gospel of God's un-repayable work of salvation for us in Christ. Hospitality communicates, and entices non-Christians and weaker Christians toward the gospel! And doing this should be understood as a basic of the Christian life.

The Unity of the Saints

Fourth, hospitality can reveal the unity of those who belong to the kingdom of God, specifically in the context of shared meals. For instance, the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus for who he was when Jesus assumed the role of host and broke bread. The clearest example of this, however, occurs in John's epistles. On the one hand, John commends Gaius for taking in "these brothers, strangers [*xenos*] as they are" (3 John 5). On the other hand, he commands a church to refuse hospitality to false teachers (2 John 10; cf. 1 Cor. 5:11).

I don't know that we can say that the incident Paul recounts in Galatians 2, where he opposes Peter "to his face" for refusing to eat with the uncircumcised group, pertains to hospitality, as such. Yet Peter's temporary unwillingness to share a meal with the Gentiles was the outward picture of a deep problem. Peter was implicitly adding circumcision to faith as the means of justification, dividing the body. Again, the refusal to share a meal pictured this. Applying this to the question of hospitality, then, it's worth asking whether there is any Christian—in your church or not—with whom you would not eat? If so, are you sure you understand the unity that Christians share in the gospel? It's not difficult to understand why Paul intends for elders in the church and older women to be marked by hospitality.

I have heard some Christians propose that hospitality can only be given to outsiders or strangers, that is, those who are literally from outside a local church's fellowship. Some go further and say that it can only be given to non-Christians. I don't see the New Testament drawing either of these lines.[2] In fact, I tend to agree with those who say the preponderance of occurrences of hospitality in the New Testament occurs toward other Christians.[3] And at least one passage strongly suggests it can occur between one church member and another (1 Peter 4:9). Ultimately, however, I think that drawing these sort of lines misses the point. The kingdom emphases of the New Testament writers seem largely to fall on the wonders of post-Pentecost, new covenant realities, where Jews would eat with Gentiles, Greeks with barbarians, owners with slaves, poor with rich, and so on. That's why the picture of the early church gathering and sharing with one another "as any had need" is so striking (Acts 2:45). That's why the apostles took very seriously the trouble that arose over a distribution of food between the Grecian Jews and the Hebraic Jews (Acts 6:1). That's why Paul could urge Philemon to take Onesimus the slave back as a "beloved brother" (Philem. 16). The various class, racial, economic, ethnic, and gender categories human beings use to separate themselves from one another—the lines which make human beings "strange" to one another—were erased by the person and work of Jesus Christ, as given expression in the inaugurated reversal of Babel at Pentecost. The giving of hospitality between Christians, whether members of the same church or not, present one opportunity to paint the picture of the unity Christians have in the gospel. At the same time, the gracious picture of salvation Christians present by giving hospitality to non-Christians.

The Church's Alien Status

Fifth, just as the incarnate Christ was a stranger, and just as the Old Testament Israelites were continually displaced from their lands, hospitality reminds those who are joined to Christ that we too are strangers and aliens. Peter writes his first letter "To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1:1). Living by faith in the care of our fellow saints helps us from becoming too tied to this world and its goods. Living by the grace and hospitality of others reminds us that everything we have is a gift from above, which is why Peter's command for Christians to show hospitality to one another ties together with a reminder that the end of all things is near.

So let's return to my original quandary: Why is hospitality (1) a virtue Paul says is central to Christianity, (2) a qualification for elders of the church and older women, and (3) a practice to be cultivated as the end approaches?

Answer: With hospitality, we proclaim to the world the incarnation of Christ, God's grace in salvation, the unity of the church, and a Christian's participation in the life of Christ. And to Christ himself we say, "I love you, because

you have identified yourself with the least of these brothers." We must preach the words of Christ's gospel, otherwise we draw attention and glory only to ourselves. But we must also preach with our lives so that those both inside and outside the church see that the power of God for salvation begins today, as Christ's people begin to image him from one degree of glory to the next.

1. *BDAG* defines *philoxenia* has "hospitality," which surely includes care for strangers, but is not restricted to strangers.
2. Tremendously helpful is the entry on "Hospitality" by C. D. Pohl in *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (IVP), ed. T. Brian Rosner et al (561-63). Much of my comments in the OT and NT follow the storyline Pohl lays out. Also helpful is Gustav Stahlin's entry for *xenos* in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, ed. Gerhard Kittel et al (1-36).
3. Stahlin, *TDNT*, 21.

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Three Testimonies of Hospitality

"When have you seen acts of hospitality commend the gospel to outsiders (a concrete illustration)?"

Answers from Ken Sande, Donald Whitney, and Ryan Townsend

Ken Sande

Hospitality leading to redemptive discipline was a key to my father's conversion.

A young husband in our church who I will call Bill lost his job and could not find work for several months. When his family's savings were exhausted and they were in danger of losing their home, our deacons stepped in and exercised the ministry of hospitality and mercy by covering the mortgage payments until Bill found a job three months later.



Several years later, Bill left his wife due to marital problems and moved to another state. Our elders initiated a disciplinary process to bring him back to his family. He had no desire to reconcile with his family, and clearly did not want to submit to our discipline. Yet in one key conversation he said, "What I want to do right now is hang up this phone and never talk with you all again. But I can't forget the fact that the church carried our mortgage for three months when I was out of work. I just can't cut you off after all you've done to show your love for me."

We eventually persuaded him to return home and reconcile with his wife. They are still together today, thanking God for a church that not only covered their mortgage but also helped to save their family.

Years ago, as we were working to bring this husband home, I shared a general description of the situation with my father, who was not a believer. He was fascinated that our church cared enough about this family to pay their bills and fight for their marriage. When my father eventually put his trust in Christ (just three hours before dying), there was no doubt in my mind that part of what drew him to the Savior was the love he had seen in his church.

Ken Sande is the president of Peacemaker Ministries, whose mission is to equip Christians and their churches to respond to conflict biblically. Go to www.PeacemakerChurch.net for more information.

Donald S. Whitney

I pastored a church in the suburbs of Chicago from 1981 to 1995. During the eighties I preached a lengthy series on biblical texts related to hospitality. Among those affected by these messages was a couple who served as greeters. As a result of encountering the biblical truth on hospitality, they began to invite people to their home for lunch each Sunday after worship.



Typically they approached one of the families or singles visiting our church, particularly those attending for the first time. The leisure to chat at length during and after a meal—in contrast to a brief conversation at the door—provided many opportunities to talk about our church, the sermon of the morning, and/or especially the gospel. Their guests often remarked about the difference between our church—represented to them by this one hospitable couple—and other congregations they'd visited where few, if any, spoke to them. This couple's hospitality often had an indelible impact upon international students, many of whom had never been invited to eat in an American home.

If nothing worked out with first-time visitors, the couple sought out returning visitors, then new members. If none of these were available, they turned to long-time members who might be in need of encouragement, or to those with whom they'd not recently spent time in fellowship.

These experiences not only touched their guests, but changed their own lives as well. In the years since my time in this church, this couple—now in a church in the place where they retired—has continued the practice of welcoming guests around their Sunday dinner table whenever possible. Lasting relationships have been initiated, fellowship developed, and the love of Christ demonstrated now on hundreds of occasions because of one simple commitment to add a couple of extra plates to the table one meal per week.

Donald S. Whitney is an associate professor of biblical spirituality at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the author of Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ (Moody, 1996).

Ryan Townsend



I remember being a new Christian and hearing about the hospitality ministry of the Smiths. This family of nine from our church would invite different folks of all backgrounds to their home regularly on Sundays. Not only did this ministry bless the individuals who were part of the Smith's hospitality, it became a well-known part of the corporate fabric of our church, encouraging us in our familial love and modeling to members and visitors alike that we are Christ's disciples because we love one another (John 13:35). Eating and hanging out with friends were two of my favorite things to do as a non-Christian. Christian hospitality, however, was something I had never experienced, where there was an evident joy and satisfaction in serving others and meeting their needs among one's own home and family. This was different, and it commended the gospel.

As evangelicals, perhaps we should consider both the power of hospitality in commending the gospel and the joy it brings to all involved. The gift of hospitality is one that Christians and non-Christians alike will quickly notice and appreciate, as we serve others in love for our good and God's glory.

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The Hospitality Commands **By Alexander Strauch**

Reviewed by Brent Thomas

Lewis & Roth, 1993, \$5.99

Our culture is increasingly individualistic and isolated. We drive through banks and pay at the pump for gas, often intentionally avoiding human contact. We're told that success means "pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps," and that needing others is a weakness. We quickly forget that even the Lone Ranger didn't travel alone.

We have been created for relationships. God noted that it was not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18), and Scripture reminds us that "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil" (Eccl. 4:9-12). Though we are saved as individuals, we are saved into a community that stands as a light in the darkness. Jesus said that it would be by our love for one another that the world would know that we are his (John 13:35).

As a pastor, indeed, as a Christian, I am saddened whenever I hear a church—whether ours or someone else's—described as cold or unwelcoming. I'm saddened that we don't welcome more people, both insiders and outsiders, into our homes. Many believers have allowed our culture's individualism to color our view of church, and we have lost a sense of community in the process.

In his book *The Hospitality Commands*, Alexander Strauch has written a clear and passionate plea for believers to regain this sense of community. He does so by focusing on hospitality, noting that the lack of hospitality in many churches is not only "loveless," it is "outright disobedience to the clear commands of Scripture." Yet hospitality only flourishes in the soil of love, and Strauch carefully examines and applies the Scriptures in order to foster both love and hospitality.



LOVE AND EVANGELISM

Strauch develops the idea of Christians as family, not "merely because they share similar ideas, interests and circumstances, but because they share the life of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:10). Love is the key to hospitality and Christians must love one another as evidence that we love God (1 John). It is love for God and for others that marks true believers, and this love will naturally express itself in acts of hospitality.

While many assume that evangelism always means going somewhere, Strauch reminds us that the home can be one of the most powerful and effective tools of evangelism. He examines the early church's use of homes as a base for ministry and reminds us that the simple act of opening one's home is a powerful testimony, partly because it is so rare.

COMMANDS TO BE HOSPITABLE

The heart of the book is a consideration of Scriptural commands to practice hospitality. Strauch lovingly demonstrates how these commands are natural expressions of a heart changed by God, and he is careful to let Scripture speak for itself and convict where necessary. By examining several clear Scriptural commands, Strauch develops the thesis that our lack of hospitality is actually disobedience. Strauch does an excellent job demonstrating just how much Scripture has to say on this often neglected topic.

Strauch considers some more subtle aspects of hospitality as well. Few churches would consider hospitality a prerequisite for a pastor, but Scripture does (1 Tim. 3:2). Caring for God's people cannot be done from a distance.

It is rare that a congregation progresses beyond its leaders. If pastors are inhospitable, the local church will be inhospitable. Leaders must first open their homes if we expect our people to open theirs.

Strauch also calls attention to the biblical connection between church discipline and hospitality. In several places, the New Testament calls on churches to refuse hospitality to false teachers and unrepentant sinners (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:11; 2 John 10). The significance of this is easily lost on an individualistic culture. But exclusion from the community sends a powerful message. Of course, it is only when local churches foster biblical community that the true impact of the command to refuse hospitality can be felt. Many of our churches miss the significance of discipline because they miss the significance of community in the first place.

PUTTING HOSPITALITY INTO PRACTICE

Strauch concludes with helpful hints for practicing hospitality, moving from the abstract to the practical. It is here that Strauch's heart is evident. He not only wants readers to see that Scripture commands hospitality, he wants to aid us in pursuing that goal. Some of these practical tips include

- **Plan ahead.** Unless you plan for hospitality, it probably won't be a priority.
- **Make a list** of people who might be encouraged by your hospitality and start here.
- **Start with your neighbors** in using hospitality as an outreach.
- **Don't forget the holiday season** as they are difficult times for many.
- **Collect and file** simple and inexpensive recipe ideas. Remove the excuse of expense.
- **Be interested in people's lives.** Learn key questions for meaningful conversation.
- **Be creative in activities for guests.** After a meal, take a walk, pray, or even sing. Keep things interesting.
- **Ask your church leaders** to teach on the topic of hospitality.
- **Pray** that God would give you joy in serving. Confess the selfishness, pride and disobedience that so often hinders us from opening our homes to others.

While this book is short and easy to read (and comes with a helpful study guide), it is also powerful, staying close to Scripture and demonstrating not only the need for hospitality but offering help implementing it. It is both an indictment and an encouragement. It rebukes our churches' neglect of hospitality, while also encouraging and equipping us to practice it. This is a valuable resource for leaders and lay people alike who want to move beyond surface-level relationship to true biblical community.

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Church Membership in a World Without NASCAR

By Mike McKinley

In our previous two articles on the topic of church membership, we saw the biblical support for the modern practice of local church membership. In this article, we will look at how some of our spiritual fathers thought about church membership.

Now, admittedly, the historical practice of the church is not binding on us. And that's a good thing, because even a cursory glance at church history demonstrates that Christians have done and believed some stupid things over the years. So we could make a historical argument for all kinds of things, like purchasing indulgences or burning witches. Hopefully, we won't repeat those mistakes again.

Even with the Christian church's spotty record, however, we ignore the past at our own peril. Ken Myers has rightly said that "our carelessness about history is a form of amnesia, a pathological condition that produces disorientation and aimlessness... [by it] we are encouraged to live in rebellion against memory which results in our acting on unrestrained instincts and sensation rather than reasoned reflection."^[1]

Certainly, Myers' indictment falls on the contemporary church in America and its approach to church membership. As people in the surrounding culture have become increasingly individualistic and reluctant to obligate themselves to anything, many congregations have simply jettisoned church membership without any reflection on why it was practiced in the first place. But history can help us, affording us an opportunity to reflect on why we do and don't do certain things.

Rather than attempt to survey the practice of the church in every time and in every place,^[2] I'd like to focus our attention more closely on the practice of the Puritans in their churches. Puritanism began as a renewal movement in the Church of England in the sixteenth century and spread to America before dying out in the eighteenth century.^[3] And they serve as a particularly fruitful study for us because their pastors and theologians devoted so much time to thinking about the local church and how it related to individual believers. They lived, after all, in a world with no NFL, NASCAR, and "Lost, Season 1: the Platinum Edition DVD Boxed Set." So they spent their time writing books about the church. It was the closest thing they had to a national pastime.

Though there was certainly a diversity of opinion and practice among the Puritans, let's examine three oft-expressed reasons why these Christians in the past practiced church membership and then ask how it can inform our practice as well.

FOR ESTABLISHING THE CONGREGATION

For many Puritans, membership was essential to the existence of the church. The church was not simply a bunch of Christians who lived in a particular region or even those who gathered on Sunday. Instead, they sought to establish a formal connection between individuals in order to form a true church. That formal connection was church membership.

The Cambridge Platform, a summary of ecclesiology put together by seventeenth century ministers in Massachusetts, points out that:

Saints by calling, must have a visible political union amongst themselves, or else they are not yet a particular church... as a body, a building, or house, hands, eyes, feet, and other members must be united, or else, remaining separate are not a body. Stones, timber, though squared, hewn, and polished, are not a house, until they are compacted and united.^[4]

That is to say, there must be a formal, conscious connection between believers in order for a church to truly exist. Otherwise, all you have is a group of disassociated people.

Whenever a believer joined a Puritan church, he or she had to pledge a covenant with the other members of the church. The covenant usually contained a commitment to follow God carefully, to look out for the welfare of the other members, to avoid conflict, and to do nothing to bring disrepute onto the church.

Without such a commitment, there could be no church. The church could have no authority over someone who had not made any kind of commitment to the congregation. Instead, church members willingly obligated themselves to a specific set of commitments, and thus they could be held accountable for keeping those obligations. Church membership—as formalized by a church covenant—served as the mortar that bound together the disparate timbers and stones of the church.

FOR PROTECTING THE FLOCK

The Puritans also believed that practicing meaningful church membership helped to protect the flock from wolves in sheep's clothing. They took pains to closely examine anyone who sought membership in the church to ensure that the individual was a true believer. Otherwise, they feared that a little leaven would affect the whole lump. The Cambridge divines found it preferable "to square rough and unhewn stones, before they be laid into the building, rather than to hammer and hew them, when they lie unevenly in the building."^[5]

They were not stupid or prideful enough to think they could tell beyond a shadow of a doubt whether someone was a true Christian. Yet they recognized their call to practice due diligence in distinguishing the true believers from the false. Prospective members, therefore, were subjected to a rigorous screening process. Each candidate would be asked to provide a public testimony, oftentimes before the whole church. Often, candidates would be examined by a board of church leaders to discover one's grasp of doctrine, one's conversion experience, and one's Christian conduct. If a candidate satisfied the board, the congregation would then have an extended period of time to register concerns about the person's character, and only after all such concerns were addressed would a vote be taken.^[6]

This may sound extreme to us. Sometimes, it sounded extreme to them. So Thomas Shepard, a Puritan pastor, had to warn his flock to "take heed of thinking elders or churches are strict."^[7] If they appeared over-zealous in examining prospective members, it was because they were convinced that "rigorous insistence upon evidence of conversion seemed... the only way to secure the purity of the church."^[8] For the Puritans, taking church membership seriously was an important way of protecting the other members of the church.

FOR EVANGELISM'S SAKE

Finally, the Puritans understood their church membership practices to be an effective way to evangelize non-members. This was particularly true in a culture where everyone attended church regularly, whether or not they were converted. In such a society, it was helpful for an unconverted person to be aware of a distinction between himself and a member of the church. The hope was that the non-member would "see no hope of enjoying church-fellowship, or participation in the sacraments"^[9] and be led to repent. By being excluded from a congregation's communion, the non-member was regularly reminded of his or her unconverted condition. Church membership helped make an evangelistic distinction between the true and the nominal believer.

In addition, as was mentioned above, the requisite conversion narratives were given publicly. This served to give a wide audience to an individual's personal and powerful experience of God's grace. That was certainly a useful way to help non-believers desire and experience that grace for themselves. In fact, there were occasions where the examination process would show the actual person seeking membership that he or she was not converted. In those circumstances, the leaders of the church would work "by love and patience to heal them and ripen them."^[10]

Given the Bible's warnings against self-deception (2 Cor. 13:5), church membership served as a means of assurance for the Puritan believer. If an individual was not a member, then he or she had no reason to be confident that he or she was a true believer. A person whose profession of faith had not been verified by the

congregation would have little grounds for assurance. That person would hopefully be driven to self-examination and pursuing the means of grace until faith was found. On the flip side, church members enjoyed the external verification that membership provided. They had a vote of confidence from the congregation to help bind up their weak faith or their need for assurance.

CONCLUSION

Some readers may find the Puritans' practice of church membership interesting in and of itself (or not), but our larger hope is to use the Puritan's experience and wisdom to help guide our practices today. While many historical circumstances have changed, the principles that drove the Puritans remain useful.

The matter boils down to the fact that the Puritans took church membership very seriously, whereas we generally don't. For the Puritans, the church's ability to control its membership was a vital part of its life and witness. A church could encourage a tender believer by admitting them into membership, and it could challenge a non-believer by denying him membership.

When our churches today do not practice meaningful membership, we forfeit those rights and powers. Nowadays, church membership means very little in most churches. If a church even maintains the practice of keeping lists of members, many times the admissions process shows little reflection upon the gravity of the task. On the one hand, we take people into membership with little concern for whether they are leaven that will ruin the loaf. On the other hand, we rob true believers of the assurance that should be theirs by making their church membership meaningless.

With all of these things at stake, rightly does the Cambridge Platform opine, "All believers ought, as God giveth them opportunity thereunto, to endeavour to join themselves unto a particular church." [11] We do well to implement their suggestion and follow their example.

1. Mars Hill Audio Journal, volume 75. July/August 2005.
2. Let's face it, you don't have the time to read such an article, and I would have to read a bunch of books in Latin. That's a lose-lose situation. If you are interested in an introduction to the early church, you may want to look at Henry Chadwick's *The Early Church* or Ivor Davidson's "The Birth of the Church."
3. Some people refer to C.H. Spurgeon as "the last Puritan", which would place the end of the movement in the 19th century. I, however, never see pictures of Spurgeon in a funny Puritan-style hat, so he doesn't make the cut in my book.
4. Cambridge Platform VI,1. You can find a copy of the Cambridge Platform in Iain H. Murray's *The Reformation of the Church* (Banner of Truth) or on any number of websites.
5. Cambridge Platform, Preface.
6. Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience*, page 141.
7. Cohen, 149.
8. Horton Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans*, page 40.
9. Cambridge Platform, Preface.
10. Cohen, 141-142.
11. Cambridge Platform V, 6.

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Wanted: Plotting and Provoking Church Members

By Greg Gilbert

If you're like most pastors, the last thing you want to hear about is church members who, by all appearances, are continually plotting against unity in the church body. Whatever board they sit on, whatever class they teach, whatever friendships they have, they seem to provoke others to discontentedness, complaining, even bickering.

You might be surprised to learn that the book of Hebrews calls for church members to continually plot and provoke in the church body. It calls them to plot and provoke for good!

At our church in Louisville, Kentucky, the other elders and I often remind our congregation of Hebrews' instruction. Here's the sort of thing we say to them.

A LITTLE CONTEXT

Most of the book of Hebrews is an exalted theological treatise about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Through nine chapters, the author of the book takes a long look at the Old Testament sacrificial and priestly system and argues that all of it was fulfilled in Jesus' life and death. With the tenth chapter, however, the author pointedly brings all this to bear on the lives of his readers. "In light of all these things," he tells them, "you are to live in a certain way."

A LITTLE EXEGESIS

Hebrews 10:19-25 lies at the heart of this exhortation. In those verses, the author calls his readers to do three things: First, they are to draw near to God. Since Jesus has won them access to God's throne by his death on the cross, they are to worship God not with fear and trembling, but with full and joyful confidence. Second, he calls them to hold fast their confession, not to shrink back and be destroyed but to believe, to have faith, and, by these means, to save their souls. With these two exhortations, the author calls on these Christians to keep a close watch on their hearts, minds, and souls. But there is a third exhortation here as well, in which he calls them to look outside themselves and focus their attention on their brothers and sisters in Christ—on the church.

The author writes in verses 24 and 25, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

Because of everything Jesus has done, and because of everything that he is, Christians are to stir one another up to love and good works. But how are we to do this? By what means can Christians spur one another to goodness and holiness? The text itself offers two ways—by not neglecting to meet together and by encouraging one another.

Now that phrase—"not neglecting to meet together"—is perhaps the Bible's clearest statement of a Christian's obligation to attend a local church. If we are part of Christ's body, then we ought, indeed, we must, covenant and share our lives together with a local body of believers. The verse could hardly be more pointed. But notice that the command not to neglect meeting does not stand by itself. It is actually a dependent clause hanging onto the verse's main clause. The command to meet together is presented as a means to another end. We Christians are to meet together *for the purpose of* stirring one another up to love and good works.

ATTEND

At the very least, therefore, we have to say that, for every Christian, attendance at church gatherings is not optional. The author of Hebrews—and therefore the Holy Spirit himself—*commands* Christians to be present when the believers to whom he or she belongs gather.

Very practically, this means that we may have to rearrange our schedules to make time for the gathering of the saints. Work schedules may have to shift. Homework may have to be done at some other time. Reports may have to be filed earlier or later. Most churches meet no more than two or three hours a week, which still leaves somewhere in the area of 145 hours for getting these other things done. According to Hebrews, encouraging and stirring up other believers ought to be at the top of every Christian's priority list, and that means attending the public gatherings of the church.

BUT DON'T *JUST* ATTEND

But the author of Hebrews is calling for more than mere attendance. Many times, Christians treat church attendance as one more item on their checklist of "Christian to-dos." They attend a church service, sit quietly and anonymously in the back of the building, listen half-heartedly to the sermon, slip out during the final hymn without speaking to anyone, and tick their mental box for the week: "Church attended. Hebrews 10:25 obeyed." But that is not at all what the author of Hebrews has in mind here. He doesn't simply say, "Attend church." Rather, he sets attending church very deliberately in the context of knowing, loving, and encouraging other believers. He sets it in the context of stirring one another up to love and good deeds.

The public gathering of a local church involves more than individuals gathering to hear God's Word preached—though it is certainly, and crucially, about that. It is also about sharing life with other believers who have covenanted to support and encourage one another as Christians. It is in the public gatherings of the church that we pray for one another, weep and rejoice with one another, bear each other's burdens and sorrows, hear the Word of God together, and work to apply it to one another's lives. In short, the gathering of the church is the most important time believers have for stirring one another up to love and good works.

PLOTTING AND PROVOKING

Notice two more things in this text. First, the author of Hebrews says to "*consider* how to stir one another up to love and good works." He's telling us, in other words, to think about it! A Christian ought to plot, plan, conspire, contrive, and design how he might stir his brothers and sisters to good works—something he simply cannot do unless his life is tightly intertwined with theirs. How exactly can a Christian plot and plan for the good of his fellow believers if he does not know them?

Second, notice the word "stir," which the KJV and NRSV translate "provoke." An individual's presence in the body should have a visible effect on others, a stirring or provocative effect: love and good deeds begin to abound in the lives of the people around them!

In short, pastor, we want to encourage our church members to plot and to provoke—for good!

AN ILLUSTRATION

This past summer, I started a massive project of laying slate tiles on my front porch and sidewalk. Over to one side, under a tree, I kept a blue Igloo cooler full of water, which I used to wash off the dirty tiles after I cut them to the correct size. After a while, I realized that all the mud I was washing off the tiles would sink to the bottom of the cooler, leaving clear water at the top and a thick layer of mud at the bottom. Now, if I wanted to stir that mud up off the bottom of the cooler and make it explode with life throughout that water, how would I do it? Walk up and bump the cooler with my knee? That wouldn't do it. The water might ripple, but the mud would stay firmly on the bottom. No, if I really wanted to stir that mud up, I would have to reach down into the water with my hands. I would have to get involved with the water, purposefully and directly stirring up the mud.

It's not a perfect analogy, to be sure, but the church is a little like that. No true church of Jesus Christ should be the kind of place where believers simply come together once a week, bump into one another, and then go on about their business. What a shame it is when Christians, not to mention non-Christians, think that this is what the church's gathering is all about! I can think of few things that would make a church more lifeless or less worth the effort.

The exhortation "not to neglect the meeting" is not so lifeless and boring as all that. It does not call Christians to sit passively in a pew. To the contrary, it calls them to a life that crackles with energy. It calls them to live together with other Christians—loving them, encouraging them, stirring them up to good works, and, perhaps most importantly, pointing them always to the Day when their Lord will return. "Going to church" won't cut it. Only by "*being* the church" can we fulfill what Christ intends for us as his people.

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Membership Matters - What is Our Church Covenant?

By Matthew Schmucker

Editor's note: What follows is the actual transcript of Matt Schmucker's Sunday School class.

Professional athletic teams usually write a "moral clause" into their players' contracts that will negate the financial package if the player fails to display at least a modicum of morally upright behavior. A few years back Jason Kidd was traded by the Phoenix Suns because he was charged with spousal abuse. Jason Kidd's poor behavior off the court was reflecting poorly on The Phoenix Suns, and the Suns were concerned enough about the public reputation of their organization that they appealed to the moral clause in Kidd's contract and disassociated themselves from him.

Back in the '80's IBM had a detailed dress code to which they required all their salesmen to adhere – Dark suit, white shirt, dark tie. They wanted you to know when you were dealing with an IBM man – they wanted a certain image to be associated with their organization so that their corporate identity would have positive associations, and so that their corporate reputation would be excellent in the eye of the public.

These two examples underscore the importance of who we say we are, who we identify with, and how that public message and identification relate to how we actually live. In other words, we have to practice what we preach. And if this is true of the corporate world of computers and athletics, how much more is it true of the church corporately and of the Christian individually?

James warns us that "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (Js 1:26). In other words, if you profess to be a Christian, but you don't live a changed life, you should take no comfort in your faith. John says "We know that we have come to know him IF we obey his commands" (1John 2:3). In short, how we live matters. In this class, we're particularly focused on how we live together as members of a local church.

What is a 'Church Covenant'?

A church covenant can be described in five different ways.

- A church covenant is a promise - a promise made to God, to a local church, and to one's self.
- A church covenant is a summary of how we agree to live. While our statement of faith is a good summary of what we believe, our church covenant is a summary of how we agree to live – more importantly, it is a summary of how God would have us live. It does not include every explicit command regarding obedience, but it does give a general summary of what it means to live as a disciple of Christ.
- A church covenant is a sign of commitment – a commitment to God, to His church, and to personal holiness.
- A church covenant is an ethical statement. Historian Charles W. DeWeese writes, "A church covenant is a series of written pledges based on the Bible which church members voluntarily make to God and to one another regarding their basic moral and spiritual commitments and the practice of their faith" (Baptist Church Covenants, p. viii). One theologian calls church covenants the "ethical counterpart to confessions of faith." A church covenant can be an important part of applying a Christian worldview to every aspect of our lives. Inherent in the purpose of a church covenant is the understanding that church membership involves being held accountable to live in a manner consistent with a common understanding of Scripture.
- A church covenant is a biblical standard. A church covenant is helpful in a church that is practicing Biblical church discipline. As members of a church, we exhort one another to live holy lives, and we challenge brothers and sisters persisting in sin.

Where do covenants come from?

Now that we know what church covenants are, where do they come from? Well, not from the Bible – not, at least, in the sense of being able to turn to the Book of Covenants chapter 3. But we do see examples of covenants both in the Old and the New Testaments – covenants between God and man, and between man and man. Moses gives a covenant from God to the people of Israel. Ezra and Nehemiah do so as well. And in the NT we find that “Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, which is the new covenant in Christ’s blood”. Primarily, church covenants come from the understanding that *churches are to be composed of people who are truly born again. This is what we call regenerate church membership.*

In the 16th century, men and women of deep conviction broke away from the Roman Catholic Church to form congregations who understood the importance of the doctrine known as justification by faith alone in Christ alone. No longer did baptism or membership bring supposed new life. Joining and being part of a church was no longer a civic duty or just part of growing up. It was becoming what it was always intended to be – a response of faith to the truth of the gospel. And in this response of faith we gain the most amazing callings: children of the living God, ambassadors of Christ, a royal priesthood; we become the bearers of God’s name in the world. Listen to God’s word on this issue. “I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the sovereign Lord, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes” (Ezek 36:23). We are called to be living witnesses of God’s holiness!

In contrast, listen to two examples of how modern churches have failed to protect the regeneracy of their membership. One church youth group commonly encouraged young people to be baptized by allowing them to observe the rite in a Jacuzzi that was built into the top of a fire truck! You might say, “So what? What’s the problem here?” The problem is that most kids would bow down and worship a hot dog for the opportunity to climb up into a fire truck and hop into a Jacuzzi! These kinds of gimmicks introduce the likelihood of inappropriate motivations for seemingly spiritual decisions on the part of young respondents. Did they get baptized because they genuinely repented and believed in Jesus Christ? Or did they do it so they could get their picture taken in a Fire Truck Jacuzzi? We often unwittingly do the same thing with adults, don’t we? We promise them changed lifestyles, increased self-fulfillment and self-esteem, increased success at work, and better marriages, if only they’ll decide to accept Jesus into their hearts. Who wouldn’t make a quick and painless decision for that kind of payoff? But if people’s motivations are wrong, then in congratulating them on their baptism or conversion and welcoming them into local church membership without ever observing the fruit of godly living as evidence of the genuineness of their verbal commitment, then we’re actually encouraging them to deceive themselves into thinking that they have genuinely repented and believed – we’re encouraging them to feel assured in their salvation when in fact they have probably never repented or believed at all. Far from doing them spiritual good, we’re doing them the greatest kind of spiritual disservice possible – and exactly the kind of disservice Satan hopes for us to provide.

Another church agonized over the decision of whether or not to allow a Porn Shop owner to lead music for worship on Sundays. What does this say about what it means to be a mature, model Christian? It says that a person can verbally profess to be a Christian – even a model Christian by whom others can be led – and simultaneously live in a way that many pagans would even consider unethical. It says that Jesus doesn’t care about whether we live holy lives – just whether we say the right words, or pray the right prayer, or participate in the right church program. But Christianity is about living a different kind of life, not just talking about different kinds of concepts.

The church is called to live and act differently. In agreeing to a church covenant, one is agreeing to be held accountable by a body of believers. Likewise, one is agreeing to hold a body of believers accountable. To hold accountable simply means “to take responsibility for.” A church covenant, void of this responsibility, is a worthless document.

Scripture highlights our need for accountability.

- Read Matt 18:15-17 – We do not have a license to sin. More than that, if we do keep on sinning, we risk proving that we have not been given new life from God. Matthew 18 gives us instruction about what to do with a persistently unrepentant sinner.

- Read 1Cor 5 – If the Corinthian congregation allowed this man to remain a member of the church, he (and others) may get the wrong impression that his sexual immorality is consistent with what it means to be a Christian. Weaker members of the body will be confused and hurt as well. And the church will risk losing her reputation in the local community.

There will always be sin in the church because we all sin. What we are talking about is how to deal with people whose lives are characterized by sin, people who agree with their sin against God and His Word, and who try to rationalize their sin instead of pleading before God for forgiveness. The purpose of such accountability is not to judge people worthy of hell-fire – that's never been the church's role. It's to protect them from deceiving themselves about their own spiritual state, to protect the corporate witness of the church from being smeared by the non-Christian behavior of professing believers, and to restore the disobedient person to right relationship with God and warm fellowship with the church.

What then should we expect out of a church covenant? Expect it to be biblical – rooted in scripture. Expect it to be focused on the whole body of believers – it should be corporate not private. And expect it to be brief.

What does our church covenant say?

To help understand Capitol Hill Baptist Church's (CHBC) covenant we have divided it into three parts. First, the introduction; second, the promises; third, the benediction. (***see covenant found at the end of this document***)

1. Introduction

We can be tempted to pass over the introduction too quickly in our rush to get to the meat of the statement. Don't do this. The introduction is rich with valuable points. Let me draw your attention to three.

- First, the covenant is to be made by Christians.** Borrowing Jesus' words from the opening verses of Mark, the CHBC covenant is to be made by those who "repent and believe" in Jesus Christ.
- Second, the covenant is to be made by baptized Christians.** The church covenant is to be made by those who have been baptized upon their "profession of faith." In other words, those who have been baptized as believers.
- Third, the covenant can only be kept with God's help** – "relying on His gracious aid." Any ability we have to fulfill the promises of the CHBC covenant is attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit, not us! This means first that we can do all things through Christ Jesus our Lord, and second, that we should have no reason to be proud of spiritual success in our lives. God gets all the credit and all the glory.

2. The Promises

- We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.** We should pray that God's peace would show itself in the body as a whole. Whether we are gathering for a Sunday morning service, or thinking through matters of church business at a members' meeting, we are to pray that the Holy Spirit would move us together, in the same direction. Unity is a fragile thing.
- Exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.** Are we bearing each other's burdens? Are we looking out for each other? Are we challenging each other when we sin? Are we entreating one another to a holy walk? Are we doing these things for people who are outside our demographic group? It is insufficient if you are only caring for those who share your demographic profile. This idea is contrary to most church-culture thinking. But it's biblical. This is what it means to be a part of a church.
- Do not forsake the assembling of ourselves together.** Christians don't meet simply so they can be blessed; we meet so that the church can glorify God. As we learn about Scripture together, praise God together, pray together and serve together, Christ's bride is being made ready for her bridegroom. So we're not here merely to have our own needs met. Nor are we a stationary Billy Graham Rally – hearing the word for someone else. Attending regularly is vital because it is the first step toward being held accountable. If you are not attending regularly (maybe you've moved, maybe you've become ill, maybe you have left for school, maybe you've simply chosen to attend another church) LET SOMEBODY KNOW...preferably the pastor. Non-

attendance is either a portal to sin or a reflection of sin. It is prevented by formative church discipline, and remedied by corrective church discipline.

- d. **Do not neglect to pray for ourselves and others.** In our own devotionals, we are to pray that God would grow us in Christ. We are to pray that he would strengthen us to do His work. We are to pray for His direction. We are also to pray for others, that His Spirit would be at work in them. That's why we encourage members to get a membership directory and pray through it a page a day all through the month.
 - e. **Bring up such as may at any time be under our care...** Maybe it's those children we have a special commitment to; maybe it is that brother or sister you are praying with each week. We covenant together to be a part of one another's lives. Discipleship or spiritual mentoring should be a daily goal.
 - f. **Seek the salvation of family and friends.** Do I know your friends? Do I know your family? NO! YOU do! The life we live during the week is to include sharing the Good News with family and friends. The proclamation of the Gospel is so important that we covenant together in order to encourage each of us to share our faith.
 - g. **Rejoice at each other's happiness.** Sometimes seeing our friends fail make us feel better. There's something wrong with that, isn't there? In a world of envy, jealousy and greed, we are called to see other's happiness and praise God for it. This may be one of the most difficult promises made in our covenant to keep. We truly are a selfish and proud people in need of God's grace.
 - h. **Bear each others burdens and sorrows.** God did not design us to go through difficulty alone. As this promise from Galatians 6 points out, God ministers to us through others. One of the best ways we can be an example to the world is through being faithful brothers and sisters in Christ to one another.
 - i. **Live carefully in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts.** One of the reasons we covenant together is because we realize that we could use some help with our own Christian walk with God.
 - j. **Support the ministry of the church.** Through prayer, commitment to biblical teaching, finances and other means, each individual member has an important role in supporting the church body.
 - k. **Evangelize.** "The spread of the gospel to all nations." Evangelism can take place in many ways. One of the most obvious ways is by us sharing the Gospel with unbelievers. We are called to do that by the church covenant. I think that this church covenant also calls us to evangelize in another way. God will show the world who he is through the church. We are a corporate witness, a display of God's holiness, by his grace. Therefore, how we serve together and love together is a means God uses to communicate the Good News to a lost world. We see this in John 13:34, where Jesus shows His master plan for evangelism: "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Get this point: we're not just individuals assembling in the same spot. God intends us to be one body! And that alone can be an evangelistic tool.
 - l. **When we move, we will unite with some other church.** Membership isn't about a particular affection for one group of Christians. Membership is about unity with the body of Christians God has physically placed you around. You are building the local church as you willingly transfer your membership. We all look forward to being together in heaven. Until then, we divide and conquer for the Kingdom of God.
3. **Benediction.** These words may sound familiar. They conclude most services at CHBC. More importantly, they are from 2Cor 13:14. We are a people who possess the grace of Jesus Christ, the saving love of our heavenly Father, union with His Son, and unity with all the family of God through the Holy Spirit.
 4. **Conclusion.** There are just two final points to make about our church covenant. First, our church covenant should be a challenge. Second our church covenant should be a comfort.
 - c. Our church covenant is a challenge simply because there are times when living a godly life is hard. It is also a challenge because each member of the church now bears responsibility for the lives of other believers – this is that "accountability goes both ways" part. This is serious responsibility. Not the kind of responsibility you have just because you are somebody's friend, but the kind of responsibility that comes from saying, before God, "I care for you and will work to encourage you in your discipleship." This challenge is a serious thing.
 - d. This covenant isn't just about us challenging each other to be better Christians. Our church covenant is also a comfort. A comfort to know you'll be cared for and prayed for, not perfectly, but faithfully. The comfort is that by joining a church and covenanting with other believers, you

- now have Christians who are going to build you up when you are down. You have Christians who are committed, before God, to walk with you, pray with you, serve you. You have Christians who are so concerned about your spiritual walk, that if they see you break the covenant you have made as a disciple of Christ, they will exhort you to turn back; and if you don't, they'll do all they can to make the gravity of your sin clear. This is our ideal, our vision, what we strive for.
- e. "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

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CHBC Church Covenant

Having, as we trust, been brought by Divine Grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to give up ourselves to Him, and having been baptized upon our profession of faith, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, relying on His gracious aid, solemnly and joyfully renew our covenant with each other.

We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church; exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.

We will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, nor neglect to pray for ourselves and others.

We will endeavor to bring up such as may at any time be under our care, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and by a pure and loving example to seek the salvation of our family and friends.

We will rejoice at each other's happiness and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other's burdens and sorrows.

We will seek, by Divine aid, to live carefully in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and remembering that, as we have been voluntarily buried by baptism and raised again from the symbolic grave, so there is on us a special obligation now to lead a new and holy life.

We will work together for the continuance of a faithful evangelical ministry in this church, as we sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines. We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.

We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.