

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Commitment to the Church

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 80-130

Those of you who know me, who have been a part of our church for any time know that I love the church. Through the years of ministry I have had occasion and opportunity to consider other kinds of ministry as to mission field ministry and educational ministry and various and sundry kinds of opportunities that have come my way. But no matter how wonderful they might have been, no matter how attractive, no matter how great the need, I have never found myself able to disassociate from the church and the ministry in the church. I love the church. It is my life. It has been the center of my life since childhood.

When I was born my father was a pastor of a church. I grew up in church. It is the place where I was led to the knowledge of God, where I learned about Christ, a place where I gained the knowledge of saving and sanctifying truth. It was in the church that I learned all the stories of the Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament. It was in the church that I learned God's moral standard for life. It was in the church where I learned how to pray. It was in the church where I learned how to sing. In the church where I learned how to live and love and serve. It was in the church that I set the standards and direction and goals for my life. It was in the church that I experienced the leading of the Spirit of God in directing me into a life of ministry.

The church is where I met my life partner, my wife. The church is where I've raised my children. And now my grandchildren. And the church is where I've made my life-long friends. And the church is my life.

I have other titles and other responsibilities but they're just sort of on the fringe and periphery of the church which is my life. And frankly, it will be forever, even in eternity we will be the gathered church, redeemed and glorified.

I am committed to the church with every ounce of being that I have. I'm committed to it with all my heart and all my soul. And there are people who say to me, "Why do you always write these books that deal with issues and why are you always concerned about all of these things going on, can't you just sit back and enjoy your Christian experience in ministry?" And the answer is, I love the church so much I want to see it be all God wants it to be. And that means I need to be a pastor, because if I wasn't the pastor I'd be driving the pastor crazy. The Lord knew that.

I don't understand people who don't love the church. I don't understand people who...who don't have a love affair with the church and can't wait to assemble with its people. I don't understand people who say things like, I heard a person say recently, "Boy, our church has a Saturday night service and it's great. You get the deal over in one hour and it doesn't mess up Sunday." That's inconceivable to me. Cannot understand that.

Or someone else who said, "I like our early-morning Sunday service, it's over in an hour and it doesn't blow the whole day." I can't wait to get here on Sunday morning and I can't wait to get back on Sunday evening. And it's been that way in my life for all my life.

I am attracted, as you well know, to eastern Europe and I'm attracted to the ministry that God has given us over there. It's limited because I don't know the language and I've told you before, if I did I'd probably go there and stay. But there is another reason I like it over there. It's not just that there's a freshness about it and a joy in the church over there. I like it over there because they have church Tuesday night, Thursday night, Saturday night, Sunday morning and Sunday night. And they get together all the time and everybody is always there. It's their life.

There was a time when coming to Christ meant coming to His church. There was a time when salvation meant union with the visible gathered body of Christ. Becoming a Christian meant fellowship. That's really changed. The emphasis, the contemporary emphasis in evangelicalism is having a personal relationship with Christ. And the process of personalizing this and banging on this issue of personal relationship to Christ which has become the pervasive theme of contemporary evangelism rarely is there any discussion about the church. It is extremely rare to pick up a gospel tract or a gospel presentation that ends with any discussion of a believer's relationship to the church. There is very low emphasis on church involvement, church membership, being a part of the family of God, the visible gathered household of redeemed saints.

And in our massive effort to make personal salvation the issue, we have really left the church behind to detriment of many, many souls. Many churches don't have memberships, they don't want memberships. They don't want people to join their church. They...in fact...teach against that. There are churches, I just read of one yesterday that doesn't require membership, doesn't require baptism, doesn't require any doctrinal statement, doesn't require anything and calls itself an evangelical church.

The reality of this low commitment to the church is upon us. It's evident everywhere. Let me just summarize it in three ways. If I look at this low level of commitment, I look at it in several ways. Number one, I can see it by the pattern by which professing Christians relate to the church. People just don't relate to the church as significant. They tend to be, I guess what I would call, ecclesiastical consumers...church hoppers. They don't really have any loyalty or any commitment to a given assembly of redeemed and gathered saints. They feel little or no attachment or obligation or regular

attendance to church involvement, it's not a priority with them. They just sort of bounce and float and hop and skip and jump around. The church may meet but certainly doesn't mean they need to be there. The church may gather to study or to pray or be trained or learn or whatever, but that doesn't really apply to them. They're, after all, involved with a personal relationship with Christ and don't understand their involvement, their life connection to the church. Much of their Christianity exists outside the church and there are plenty of things outside the church that are under the Christian banner which can occupy their life without ever getting very committed or involved in the church. That's tragic.

This low-level of commitment shows up not only in the pattern by which people relate to the church and just sort of float around and make no commitment, but secondly, by the neglect of the ordinances of baptism and communion. There are many people who would call themselves Christians who have never been baptized. There are many more who call themselves Christians and may well be Christians and may well be Christians who have little or no interest in attending the Lord's table. And if it happens to hit on a night when they can schedule it in, they'll come...or a morning when they can schedule it in, they'll come, but in general that's not a priority for them. This is even more serious, by the way. And many churches are now deprioritizing baptism and deprioritizing communion, just sort of regulating it to some backwater because they feel that if done in the public service it becomes offensive. It's a sad thing because baptism itself is the single greatest testimony that the church has to the changing power of Jesus Christ, right? Why would you put on a church skit to dramatize that when you can have a living testimony? On the other hand, they deprioritize communion because they feel communion would offend an unbeliever who happened to be there because it shuts him out and communion is how we show forth the Lord's death until He comes and what is our message?

Some ignore baptism all together and many churches don't require it. They don't require it after you're saved. They don't talk about it. They don't talk about it. They don't require it for church membership. And they're not concerned about the Lord's table. That is to say, it's not required for everyone, it's not an urgency of the lives of people and yet those are the two things that Jesus said we were to do.

And even where baptism and communion are administered, for the most part they're directed at personal faith rather than at the unity of the church. They don't celebrate the commonality of the church, all being baptized into one body, namely the church of Jesus Christ, and all gathering at the foot of the cross to share in the Lord's table in common as mutually recognizing our sin and repenting of it. People can attend many churches and never experience a baptism, many churches and never experience a communion.

Thirdly, another dramatization, another evidence of this disinterest in the church is the massive development of ministry outside the church. There has been a significant evangelical power shift, if I can call it that, away from the church. Para-church ministries have developed and proliferated beyond imagination. And for every Christian who seems to have a little idea about what he'd like to

do, there's liable to be a Christian organization started. And then that Christian organization creates an environment in which it can exist and raise money and do whatever it needs to do without any consideration to the church, usually indifferent to the church and not accountable to the church.

The best of these succeed. The most inept of them fail. Highly promoted slick wealthy ministries led by unusually talented and gifted people supported by wealthy patrons will survive and they'll use sophisticated marketing methods to engulf millions of dollars. And they can build a very highly successful operation. Some of what they do is very good, it just doesn't have anything to do with the church. It isn't the church, it's out there, it was intended to come alongside and help the church. At the turn of the century the church liberalized and that's what caused independent churches to grow up because the denominations were so corrupt and heretical. And along with the denominations came all of these independent ministries and now in the typical noble independence of the American spirit, we continue to proliferate that kind of thing until there are so many of them you can't even keep up with them. Some of you know how many there are because they come to your home in the form of mail unendingly.

National Christian personalities have become the heroes of evangelicalism. And local pastors are basically unappreciated and often maligned. It was interesting recently to read about a meeting that President Clinton had with twelve evangelical leaders and out of the twelve evangelical leaders who were going to come to him, he wanted them to represent to him their concerns about Christianity in America and related to the government. And ten of them were outside the church. The system even recognizes that the church is not necessarily the spokesman. This is the shift, significant shift in the power of evangelicalism. I think that shift is even going further. Now we're having a shift from just para church power, para church organization to mega para church organization. And the mega para church organizations are redefining Christianity and they're establishing who the heroes are. And the sad part about it is they tend basically to be atheological, adocrinal without regard for doctrine, theology.

Even the educational side of evangelicalism is fallen victim to this in some ways. I can give you an illustration of that. There is a journal called "The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society," of which I am a member. To belong to that society you have to affirm the inerrancy of Scripture and be associated with some scholarly endeavor in terms of theology. And in "The Journal of Evangelical Theology" they have been printing articles of original research and insight on things scriptural for 34 years. In 34 years they have produced one article on the nature of the church...one in 1969, none before and none since.

Evangelicals are systematically turning away from the church. It's sort of a pervasive kind of thing. Busy winning people to Christ but not to the church. This is totally foreign to Scripture. Coming to Christ is coming to the church. Any idea of experiencing salvation without belonging to a local church is foreign to the New Testament. The epistles of the New Testament were written to churches and in

the case where they were written to individuals, such as Philemon and Timothy and Titus, they were in key roles of leadership in churches. And the general epistles seem to have been directed at assemblies of saints even though they are not identified in any given local. Sometimes as in the case of James, scattered believers who were meeting in various places. You only need to start to read the epistles of the New Testament to know that the Lord assumed that believers would be in gathered assemblies, not running around loose. The Holy Spirit wanted to communicate a message to believers, the title of it is 1 Corinthians and this is what it says, "Paul, called as an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother to the church, the church which is at Corinth." And when the Holy Spirit wanted to send another letter, 2 Corinthians, "Paul an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy our brother to the church, which is at Corinth." And when the Lord wanted to reach saints and give them instruction about the law and freedom and grace, He inspired Paul to write and Paul wrote the book of Galatians, "Paul an Apostle and all the brethren who are with me to the churches." First Thessalonians 1 says essentially the same thing, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church." In 2 Thessalonians it says, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church."

The assumption in all of this is that people are gathered in a local assembly where the Word of God is disseminated. They are a gathered community of worshiping saints, belonging to the church, not just the church invisible but belonging to the visible gathered militant church, as its been called in the world, is at the very heart of Christianity. It is the expressed unity of the body made visible. The church gathers to participate in worship and baptism and communion and ministry, it expresses its spiritual reality in its corporate identity. The Lord never established any institution except the church. Christ is the head of the church and under His headship come a plurality of godly pastors and elders who lead those who serve. And that's the definition of the church. And there's nothing beyond or outside that. There are many, many now Christian organizations, para church organizations that are led by people who are not qualified to be pastors or elders, who have no accountability to an assembly of redeemed and gathered saints, who have no regard for things like baptism and communion.

Frankly, the idea of an unbaptized Christian isn't even in the New Testament. Baptism even becomes a term that is a synonym for salvation...one Lord, one faith, one baptism. That's talking about the baptism that is the outward expression of an inward relationship, an inward identification. Failure to be at the Lord's table in a New Testament setting was cause for grave concern and perhaps church discipline. In fact, even coming to the Lord's table without having your heart right could be a cause of sickness or death.

It's obvious that the early church knew its flock. In Acts 20 the Apostle Paul wrote to the elders at Miletus and said, "You're to shepherd the flock of God." It's very difficult to shepherd if you don't know who your flock is. And sheep don't survive well just roaming around on their own. In Acts, just to give you an illustration of this sense of belonging, in Acts chapter 2 verse 41 where the church is born it

says, "So then, those who had received his words...the words of Peter...as he preached were baptized." Of course, that was obvious, inevitable, immediately they would be baptized. "And there were added that day about 3,000 souls." Added to what? Added to the others. Who were the others? Well at least 120 that gathered in the upper room would be on the list. And they must have had a secretary or somebody who could take the names of these people who were baptized and they were all added to the list. And then in verse 47, "The Lord kept adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." And the church was meeting day in and day out, celebrating its life and its joy in the Messiah. And the Lord was by the power of the Holy Spirit converting many and they were being added to the church.

Come over to chapter 5 of the book of Acts, verse 14, "And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women were constantly added to their number." And this thing was growing. Somebody was keeping a list of who was in the flock. The indication of these being added implies there was someplace where they were added. There are references, of course, throughout this period in the book of Acts to the whole church. The church saved, baptized continuing, remember that in Acts 2:42 in the Apostles doctrine, prayer, fellowship, and the breaking of bread? They were all together. They were all one. This is how it was. And then the church was started in Antioch and developed from there. Then the church went west in the ministry of Paul and those who traveled with him. And the church was seeing people come to Christ and then being baptized and then being gathered in a local assembly. Any time somebody moved or relocated, as people do today, they would send letters. In Acts chapter 16, for example, pardon me, chapter 18, I think it's verse 27, we read about that kind of thing. This is a passage talking about Apollos, and when he wanted to go across to Achaia the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. This is very typical. Here's a Christian brother, he's going from one place to the next. They're going to write a letter of commendation so that the church that's receiving him knows he comes with the blessing of the church from which he came.

In Romans, the last chapter, chapter 16, there's a commendation in verse 1 of a lady named Phoebe apparently who was on her way to Rome and when she arrives in Rome she is going to come with commendation because the Apostle Paul says in Romans 16, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea. Receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints and help her in whatever matter she may have need of you for she herself has also been a helper of many and of myself as well." Here is a typical letter of commendation. Here is a member in good standing named Phoebe moving from Cenchrea to Rome. The Roman church needs to accept her. That's the church keeping track of its sheep and letting other congregations know that this individual is to be received as one who is genuine in naming the name of Christ. The church was very concerned to keep the tares out, to maintain its purity and to be sure that those coming in were not factious, heretical or sinful people. There was this tremendous concern to keep the church pure.

In Colossians chapter 4 and verse 10 it mentions Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sending his greetings. And then it mentions Barnabas' cousin Mark. And then there's a parenthetical comment about Mark in Colossians 4:10, "About whom you received instructions, if he comes to you, welcome him." So again when Christians move from place to place, there was a letter, a letter authenticating their conversion and their good standing in the life of the church.

And then in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 Paul says, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?" In other words, do I have to start all over again with you Corinthians like you didn't know me? "Do we need as some letters of commendation to you or from you?" They were treating him like a stranger and he said, "Do I have to go back through that process again?" What I'm calling to your attention there is just that there was a process...letters of commendation, recommendation, transfer in the relocation of believers was a part of church life.

And so, the early church knew nothing but baptism and assembly in gathered groups of believers in a local area for the purpose of worship, the Lord's table, prayer, fellowship and witness. My heart is really grieved at the nature of the evangelical church today and I do feel responsible to confront it because I know the Lord loves His church, He died for His church, He shed His blood for His church. I know the church is not only the body of Christ through which He will work His will in the world but it is the bride of Christ, the object of His affection and love. And He wants a chaste and pure bride. He wants the church to be all it should be. Hence this message this morning.

Now many of you are members of Grace Church. That's biblical. If you're sort of a non-member, you're just floating in that limbo out there. That's something totally foreign to Scripture. Many of you are members of Grace Church. Some of you are faithful members. Some of you are not faithful members. Some of you are not members. And some of you not members are faithful not members. And some of you are not faithful not members.

According to Hebrews 13 I have to give an account to God for you. How can you shepherd the flock to which you must give an account to God if you don't even know where the sheep are or who they are? It's very difficult...very difficult. It's very difficult, for example, when someone leaves the church who is not a member of the church to have any way to know they ever left...except in a small group of people that may know them. Sometimes a person will leave a church and we will try everything we can to track them because we feel responsible for their spiritual life and so we hear that they end up in a church in another place and so it may come down to a letter that says "we think this person was at our church until so-and-so and now we think they've gone to your church, we're not sure," that's very difficult. And we may get a letter back and say that the person you think was in your church who you think is in my church I don't think is in my church. How can we be responsible for shepherding? How can we be responsible for keeping account of people to which we have to give an answer to God?

So if you want to do it as Hebrews 13:17 says so that we can do it with joy and not with grief, then you learn to submit and obey and be a part of the flock with which you identify. Half of any Sunday morning congregation at Grace Church are non members. I mean, some of you for a long time. Two dear folks turned in their little membership card to join the church this morning who have been coming for 22 years...22 years. One conversation went like this, "I've been in the choir for 13 years, I think I ought to join." Well it might be ignorance. You're just ignorant about it. It might be indifference. It might be fear of being exposed for some sin in your life. It might be reluctance to be given any kind of ministry responsibility. None of those is acceptable to the Lord, is it?

Now I want to teach you some essential issues of church membership, okay? And these are things that I think will be clear to you and hopefully motivating.

First of all, it's an obedience issue. Identifying with the church, officially joining and being a part is an obedience issue. I've just pointed that out. The New Testament clearly indicates that believers were baptized and assembled into gathered recognizable groups. Their names were on a list. They were identified as the flock and the shepherds knew who they were. And when they moved from one place to another, some letter went along with them in order that a transfer might be effected to another local assembly of believers.

Letters, epistles of the New Testament were written to those gathered believers. There was never any assumption that some Christian would be floating around loose all by himself. There was a real spiritual unity of saved souls. And that real spiritual unity just as it is today was manifest in local groups of believers gathered together for the purpose of sanctification and worship and witness. It's a biblical pattern. And what we have today in this evangelical consumerism is not biblical. This church hopping and bouncing around, we do everything we can to track every person that comes and goes from our church. I read one of the little lists, someone had left our church and the little comment at the bottom after they were called and we send letters and we try everything we can to know where they go was "We're now attending...and they listed a certain church...and a couple of other churches." That's a dead giveaway to me. What that means is they're not probably going anywhere very frequently. And when they do they hop around to where the action is...utterly unknown to a biblical pattern of identification with a gathered group of believers to whom we commit ourselves for the glory of Christ. It is an obedience issue.

And I think it may be a sin issue, there may be things in your life that you don't want exposed...let me encourage you by saying all the rest of us have problems too. Don't wait till you get perfect before you come. One lady said, "I don't want to join the church, there are too many hypocrites." I said "Fine, we can always take more." It's only a question of degree, right? I didn't say that to anyone this morning...that was...that was when I was young.

It is an obedience issue. Secondly, it's a fellowship issue. Believers were introduced into a church, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ for the sake of common shared spiritual life. We are those of like precious faith. We have entered into a fellowship, a partnership, participation. Paul told the Corinthians they had been called into the fellowship, the fellowship of His Son, God's Son...a fellowship which was so wonderful and so unique and so blended that they were to make sure there were no divisions and no quarrels and no arguments and no debates in the fellowship.

John the Apostle in writing 1 John 1 verse 3, "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you that you may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." Saved to enter into the fellowship, the partnership. The word *koinonia* means partnership. Galatians 2:9 says, "In recognizing the grace that has been given to me, James and Cephas and John...Paul writing...who were reputed to be pillars gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of...what?...fellowship." That's why we do that. It's New Testament. You're taking them by the hand and bringing them into the fellowship, common participation in eternal life as its manifest in the visible life of the church.

In Hebrews chapter 10 is a wonderful section of Scripture, verse 23, "Let's hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together is the habit of some but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near." The closer we get to the return of Jesus Christ the more we need the fellowship. Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together. Stimulate one another to love and good deeds. It is the habit of some, he says, not to be together, not to be in the assembly. It's wrong, sinful. I can't understand why people aren't here every time the gathered believers meet. I can't understand how people feel they've done some kind of a duty on Sunday morning and don't need to come back on Sunday night. And, you know, most churches are jettisoning Sunday nights systematically, I mean, we're one of the few left that have a Sunday night service. I can't comprehend that. I'm always trying to think of how to have more services.

I had the opportunity to gather with believers in another local assembly on Thursday night and I relish that privilege and that joy. And it's usually...usually happens to me every week, some other place. The sharing of our common life, the building of friendships, the bearing of burdens, mutual care, mutual prayer, that's the life of the church. It's the life of sharing love. It's the life of sacrifice. It's the life of giving sacrificially, both my money and my time and my energy on behalf of others. It's coming together for the sake of the Lord's table. It's coming together to sing praises to Him and the collective choir, the collective hallelujahs that rise from an assembled congregation. That's the fellowship. Coming to the Lord's table is when we come for purging and purification and repentance and confession and renewed devotion. And that's a precious, precious treasure. And the fellowship should run deeper and deeper as our lives are more entwined and as we get to know each other more and

more and we really do have spiritual friendships that are deep and profound and life changing and strengthening. It is a fellowship issue to be a part of a church, a local assembly.

Thirdly, it's an authority issue. Believers are to be brought into the church under pastoral rule. Now we rule not by might or by power but by the Word of God. I don't have any authority over your life. Some pastors like to think they do and you get these pastors and these churches that are somewhat abusive or dictatorial where they tell you you can't marry this person, you can't marry that person, you can't take that job, you can't move your family over here, you can't do this and they want to control your life. That is...that is an illegitimate authority. The only authority we have is the authority that comes out of the Word of God and by the Spirit working through our giftedness applying the Word to your life. But you need to come under that authority.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 12, "We request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you," that's your elders and pastors and teachers, "and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction." You need to appreciate those whose role it is to lead you and guide you, oversee your life, to instruct you, to teach you, to train you. You are to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

And as I noted earlier, in Hebrews chapter 13 verse 7, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the Word of God to you. Imitate their faith." And then in verse 17 he says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief for this would be unprofitable for you." And it is a grief when you're responsible to shepherd people who won't be faithful to be in the flock. We're here to train and disciple and support and serve you. We're here to pray and teach. We're here to give you oversight.

We're here also to admonish and to warn and to reprove and rebuke and exhort and even to discipline in the application of the Word of God to your life. But that's all for your good, isn't it? To evade that, to avoid that is to your detriment. We're here to enforce the Word of God. Occasionally where we find a factious man, we rebuke him once and twice and then reject him. Where we find someone who continues in sin, we discipline and put him out of the church, admonishing him to repent but not allowing him to associate with us. All of that is for the purity of the church. All of that is for the cleansing of the church, for the virtue and holiness of the flock.

We're here to protect you from the wolves who would tear you up, from the people who would steal away your heart and your resources, your energies confuse you about the truth. You need the oversight. It is an authority issue. It is a soft authority. It is a biblical authority. It is not a personal one, it is not a harsh one. It's for your benefit. It's the authority of a loving father and a tender mother as Paul described it to the Thessalonians. You wouldn't imagine, would you, that a child would flourish on its own, and yet how many Christians try to do that? Little wonder they're confused. And in the battle with sin, they're losing.

Fourthly, this matter of church membership is an identity issue...it is an identity issue. You are by title a Christian, that means a little Christ. You have been joined together with Christ. There's no way to tell, in a sense, where He stops and you start. Your life and His life are together. Your life is hid with Christ in God, nevertheless you live, yet not you but Christ lives in you...Galatians 2:20. You are His own. You have been bought with a price, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. You bear His name. That's who you are. More than anything else, you are Christ's by virtue of His salvation and you bear His name more than any other name. You are His church, you are His body and you are His bride.

It is true, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, one Spirit, one church, one hope...we are all united with the self-same Christ. Are you ashamed to belong? Are you like Timothy, maybe, on the edge of that when Paul said to him, "Don't be ashamed of the Lord or of me His prisoner?" Are you ashamed to bear that identification and to bear the identification with other believers of like precious faith? Amazingly the Lord is not ashamed to call you His and that could ruin His reputation, frankly, to be identified with you and me. And though He's not ashamed to call us His, are we ashamed to call Him ours? Are we ashamed to identify with Him? You must be a part of what you believe in.

I'm amazed how many things people join that reflect what they believe in. I mean, people join all kinds of organizations for what they believe in. And more than any other thing, any other organization on the face of the earth if you want to talk about really belonging then you really belong when you're a Christian because you're not even a citizen of this world. You belong to an eternal family. Shouldn't you be willing outwardly to identify with the visible gathered members of that group to which you eternally belong?

Church membership is an issue of obedience, fellowship, authority, identity. Fifthly, it's an issue of loyalty. It is an issue of loyalty. We're like a family. I love loyalty. In fact, I can't think of anything I like better than loyalty. I love the fact that God is loyal to His own and Christ is loyal to His own. I love the fact that believers are loyal to one another and loyal to the Lord. Loyalty was what Jerry was singing about this morning when he said, "Though my foe may slay me, I will serve the Lord." There's no way you can take my loyalty away. And believers are called to be loyal to Christ and loyal to each other.

But that isn't how people think today. People don't say, "You know, I probably ought to go to church tonight because there might be somebody there who would need me. There might be somebody there I could pray for. There might be somebody there I could sit with and sing hymns, praise to God. I better go tonight because it might encourage the pastor that I'm there and I better go because the Spirit of God might have something to say to me that's going to make my life more effective as a witness to the people around me. You know, I really need to be there because there are going to be people there who probably have burdens and maybe I'll run into one of them, they'll share it with me

and I'll need to know it so I can pray about it." We don't think like that. We say, "Well, let's see...shall we go to dinner over here or shall we go to church? Well, we could go visit Aunt Martha over there, you know, she'll leave us in the will if we show up enough times...or whatever." We just grieve in our hearts who are pastors at the disloyalty of so many people. They're loyal to their own interest but they're certainly not loyal to the interest of others, the needs of others and the gathered church.

Listen to Ephesians 2...yes, verse...well I'll start at verse 19, "So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens." We're not just floating around out there. "But you are fellow citizens with the saints and you're of God's household." Wow. Part of a family. We've tried to raise our family to understand family loyalty. You never do anything that violates family loyalty. These are the people God has given you. These are the most precious people in your world. These are the people you need most. These are the people that mean the most. These are the people that offer the most to you. Family is a precious thing and you need to be loyal. There should never be rivalries within the family or animosity in the family...it's too precious. We need each other. It's a difficult world. You don't want to ever alienate your children from their grandparents. You don't want to alienate brothers and sisters because they need each other. And in the spiritual dimension that is so true. How crucial it is to realize we're God's family and there needs to be a high level of loyalty to that family.

I come because I want the fellowship, because I want to be with you, I want to be with God's people. It isn't just that I want to speak to you, it is that I want to be a part of your life, that I sense a loyalty to family. You're sitting at home maybe saying, "Well, you know, we can always get the tape." That's a selfish approach, isn't it? If he says anything on the tape worth hearing, we'll hear it...it will show up in a book or somewhere. That isn't the idea. This is a family and we meet and you're part of the family. And you give yourself in loyalty to the needs and interests and the heart cries of the others.

Sixth, it's a ministry issue or service issue. All the spiritual gifts function in the church. The church is the place where spiritual gifts are to be ministered. It's what the New Testament calls the fellowship of serving. Unselfish love will make you serve. You come to serve. You say, "I want to go cause I might be able to talk to somebody, I might give them counsel out of the Scripture...I've been reading a book on this and maybe somebody will need the answers that I've gained from this book...maybe I'll be able to pray with somebody...maybe I'll be able to encourage somebody, or comfort somebody, maybe my spiritual gifts can be used, whether it's a gift of preaching or teaching or a gift of helps or a gift of giving or a gift of instruction...whatever that spiritual gift might be." That all goes on in the church.

You see, we're here as apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers, as Ephesians 4:11 says, for the perfecting of the saints for the work of service. We're here simply to pour our lives into you so you can serve each other. That's how the whole thing works. That's how a body works, right? It just ministers to itself. It mutually meets all the needs of all the parts so it functions perfectly.

It grieves me that people can be involved in a church superficially and have no ministry. They can be very busy in a whole lot of stuff that's going to burn, perish and have absolutely no heart for what will alone last forever.

I have a hero, a real hero in my life. His name is Epaphroditus and Philippians chapter 2 tells about him. Paul says, verse 25, "I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus...listen to this...my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier." Here was a man who had come alongside the Apostle Paul and served with him. He is a servant to my need, he says. And he said the reason I'm sending him because...verse 26...he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. He was upset not because he was sick but because he thought they'd be upset because they found out he was sick. What a compassionate selfless man. Indeed...verse 27 says...he was sick to the point of death. He almost died. But God had mercy on him and not on him only but on me, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. If there's one guy I didn't want to lose it was him.

How did he get sick? Verse 30, "He came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me." He almost killed himself in service. Boy, that's a far cry from what many people, most people are willing to do. He almost killed himself in serving someone else. Did he ever preach? I don't know, none of his sermons are recorded. Did he ever have the front? I don't know. I don't know if he ever said anything profound, significant or life changing but whatever he did on a personal...I mean to a large group...but whatever he did on a personal level was life changing and Paul couldn't imagine anything but sorrow upon sorrow if he wasn't there. That's how he had endeared himself to Paul by being a servant. It is an issue of ministry. Belonging to the church is an issue of sharing your life and your spiritual gift and pouring yourself into the needs of others. Service. This is the place for that. This is where that happens.

And we always say that. When you become a part of the church you're saying I'm ready to serve. And when you don't become a part of the church you're saying I don't want to serve. Don't get me into that, I don't want responsibility. Well listen, you're also going to miss privilege and blessing and joy and peace and fulfillment and eternal reward.

And then seventh and lastly, it is a...it is a witness issue. It is an evangelistic issue. You know, I just grieve in my heart sometimes when I ask myself...what do people in the world think Christians are? Just these floating people who sort of call themselves Christians and just kind of wander around out there and say, "Well, I'm a Christian," and somebody says, "Well, what church do you belong to?" "Well, I'm a free Christian, I just..." It's like a range chicken, you know, they...whatever those are. "I just sort of float around and..." You know, it's a wonderful thing in this community after all these years to be able to say, "Well, you know, I go to Grace Community Church," because there's a platform of credibility in this community for the years of ministry that this church has had that's going to cause some people to say, "Oh, I know." It was wonderful the testimony of Robert Logistrom(?) who died of

AIDS and was saved out of the homosexual community. He had asked somebody, "Where can I go? I'm going to die of AIDS, I need help. Where will I go?" And I don't even know who he asked, somebody in the homosexual world. And they said, "Well, if you're really serious, there's a place called Grace Community Church."

We had at our Christmas concert thousands of people. And through the years they've come and they know we proclaim Christ, right? They don't have any question about that. They know exactly where we stand. And when you identify with us, you identify with what they understand to be our message. They know.

John 13:34 and 35, Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that you're My disciples if you have love one for another." They're going to...your witness is going to be believable on the basis of your relationships. First Corinthians 14:24 and 25, an unbeliever comes into the assembly, he hears the Word being proclaimed, he sees you worshipping, he falls on his face, he repents.

I remember a lady was going to the synagogue down here on a Saturday...no, on a Sunday. She was going to what they call...they have sort of a Sunday training thing and so she was going there and she saw this huge crowd coming down here...she told me all this. And she said, "I thought this must be a better deal than that one cause all these people are going down here." So she got in the flow from the synagogue parking lot. Parked her car in the synagogue parking lot and got in the flow to Grace Church. Came down here, was saved and baptized. Now I...she said to me when she was being baptized that before we were talking she said, "You know, I never heard a word you said in that sermon." She said, "But I was overwhelmed at the love and I was overwhelmed at the worship. I was overwhelmed at the singing. I was overwhelmed at these people who obviously knew God and knew what they believed and were affirming all of that." And it took a matter of two or three weeks and she turned from Judaism to embrace her Messiah and was saved and baptized.

First Peter chapter 2 verse 9 says, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." I love that. You are a nation. You are a group, "A people for God's own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." Here we are collected together proclaiming the reality of Christ. This is powerful. I mean, imagine an unbeliever who just goes into a little sort of dead church, half filled with indifferent people and what he assumes to be their relationship with their God. Very different. We have a tremendous impact in a collective testimony here. When we gather together on a Sunday night, and unbelievers come, this church is filled with people excited to worship God, to exalt Christ and to be a part of the gathered fellowship, that says volumes to that person. Much more than our cleverness and ingenuity could ever say...much more.

There's reality here. We don't need to dramatize, we just need to show you reality. Not becoming a member, obedient to the scriptural standard, not fellowshiping faithfully with other Christians, not

submitting to the applied authority of the Word taught by pastors and teachers, not being willing to identify with Christ and Christ's own, not being eager to accept the rich privileges of family in its loving loyalty is sin. And not joining the church is saying I don't want to serve the only institution that Christ ever built. And not joining the church hampers our witness because it shows a lack of non-commitment on the part of people who name the name of God. How wonderful can Christ be if we're not even committed to be associated with His church? Commitment in a day like today is so crucial.

Now you're saying, "But you're talking about our church?" Sure because you come here. If you're part of another church and you're involved and you're a member of another church and you're faithful to that church, you be faithful as long as they're faithful to the Word of God. But I'm telling you that Grace Community Church is an unusual church and God has brought you here and God has blessed this church uniquely.

You say, "Well, the problem with this church is it's too big." Too big for what? Too big for what? "Well I like a small church." Well look, they tell us you can only have 200 friends in your widest circle of friendship. Nice thing about Grace Church, you can pick the 200 you want. Shop around. The church too big for what? Too big for praise? Too big for glorious corporate worship, music? No. Too big for the preaching and teaching of the Word of God? No. Too big for training and discipling and nurturing of your children, your young people? No. Too big to reach out to the lost? Too big to reach the handicapped and disabled? Too big to reach the world through missions? No. This is a very unusual church. The reason it's big is because of what it is and that's what God has done.

This church has had and still has blessed people, loving, supportive, faithful, prayerful, kind, generous, dedicated people. I could leave and go to another church but I've never found a church that I would want to leave and go to.

You say, "Well if you went somewhere else you'd be the preacher." Yeah, but I'd still have to deal with the people. And you're the best I've ever met. Plus, I've had all these years to get you where you need to be, you know. And the thought of starting over again is paralyzing. People sometimes say to me, "Have you ever had a revival in your church?" And I say no, because we've never been dead...so what's to revive. I think we've been in it all along. We have high points and sometimes low points.

And this isn't the work of men. People ask me how do we do it and I don't know, I'm a spectator just like you. What Christians all over the world would love to experience of God's Word and God's power, we've lived through, haven't we? There are millions who would trade places with you. They've languished in dead places, praying for some movement of God's power. They've seen only glimpses of what we see in abundance. This is an extraordinary place. God has done it all. And I confess personally that myself along with the other caretakers of this church while we desire to be wise and godly men are frail and weak. And what has been done here has been done by God. And just because we fail and because we are weak doesn't make it less the work of God, it makes it more the

work of God, right? Cause His power is perfected in our weakness.

If you want spiritual resources, they're here. Every imaginable opportunity for spiritual growth, development, training, ministry, it's all here. You just need to come to the table and be a part. It's really your church, not my church. I hear people say John MacArthur's church...this isn't my church, it's your church. I'm the servant serving this church, it's your church.

I wish I could tell you all the things the pastoral staff gave me this week. I had them turn in some little vision sheets and tell me all the things that they saw in the future in terms of ministry needs and opportunities, and it's just a tremendous thing. I don't have time to do that. But we have a glorious and marvelous future. The Lord has been faithful to this church. His hand is on this church. He's taken us through the good times and the hard times. He's brought us to the best of times right now. He's brought you this far to be associated with this church and it's time to belong, it's time to be a part. It really is.

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