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

The Skeleton
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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I. INTRODUCTION

When I go on a trip to preach in other places, I use my time to talk with people, pray to the Lord, and read books. I also find that during a trip, I am able to put aside the pressures of my regular ministry and think clearly. At times like that, the Lord impresses upon my heart certain things that are important for me to understand and to share with the people I minister to. During one of my recent trips, the Lord placed a concern in my heart for Grace Church. That church is the heart and soul of my life. Although I've been there for fifteen years, I still feel like the ministry there has just begun. I believe there is an exciting future before the church that will be filled with joy, anticipation, and potential. But I also believe that we are faced with a crisis. How we handle that crisis right now will determine the kind of future we will have.

During a recent vacation, I was playing golf with another pastor. He had a desire in his heart to build up his church, and asked me some questions about that. Then he asked me, "Is it difficult for you to pastor a church as large and active as yours? Now that your church is established, are you able to rest?" I told him, "Being a part of building a church is easy. It's like sitting in a sailboat while someone else blows it along. "

A. The Analysis

1. THE GROWTH

I can honestly say that when Grace Church was experiencing tremendous growth, many wonderful things happened. There were so many things happening that I couldn't keep up with them. God was doing His work there. That was an exciting, euphoric time for the church. I like to call that time the years of discovery. When I came to Grace Church, I didn't know much. Every week, I'd study and prepare my sermons, and on Sundays the congregation would learn together with me. I'd share what the Bible said, and people would say, "Wow! So that's what the Bible is saying!" We were taking big steps in terms of our spiritual growth and understanding, and the Lord added many people to the church. Those years were like a prolonged honeymoon. There was enthusiasm and energy

everywhere. Even though we are doing many things now that we didn't do in those years, everything was just marvelous.

2. THE GOAL

When I first arrived at Grace Church, my goal was to keep the people already there from leaving. I thought that if I could accomplish that, then that would be a moral victory. I never envisioned that the church would grow to the size it is now. That's why I say that the verse that I have come to understand the most in the years of my ministry is Ephesians 3:20: "Now unto Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above that we ask or think. . . . " I have seen God do much more than I could ever imagine!

3. THE GENERATIONS

During Grace Church's early years, everybody was excited and very sacrificial. Everybody was a part of the growing together. One of the people on the church staff recently told me, "The history of a church and its people seem to always follow an interesting pattern. The first generation of people fight to discover and establish the truth. " Grace Church went throught that; the early years were a time of discovery and establishing the truth. He continued, "The second generation fights to maintain the truth and proclaim it. " We have seen that at Grace Church. The things we have learned, we have put in books and on tapes. We have trained men to become pastors, go out, and start teaching other people. We have shared what we know with other pastors. We want to maintain and proclaim the truth. Then the staff person said, "But the third generation couldn't care less about all of that. " Why? Since they weren't a part of the fight the first two generations faced, they don't have anything at stake. They tend to take for granted the things that have already been established.

B. The Anxiety

1. ABOUT CALLOUSNESS

That really scares me. I told the pastor I was golfing with that the toughest thing to deal with in the ministry is indifference. It's heartbreaking to know that there is a tendency for those who weren't a part of the building of the church to take everything for granted. Because they weren't a part of the battle, they didn't pay the price or enjoy the sweet taste of victory. They don't know what the battle was like. A person has only one life to live, and I look at what God has given me as the greatest possible use of my life: being a part of building Grace Church. But the thing that I fear is that those who weren't a part of the process of fighting, discovering, and establishing the truth will not be able to appreciate what God has done.

In Deuteronomy 6, we read that God saw that the Israelites might eventually forget all that He had done for them. First, they were reminded of the need for a. . .

a. Commitment to God

God, in His wonderful grace, chose Israel to be His people. In His mercy, He literally inundated them with divine grace and blessing. In Deuteronomy 6:3-5, He told them, "Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it, that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. " In other words, God was saying, "Israel, if you are going to hold true to the faith, you must love Me with all your heart, soul, and might. "

You are to love God in the same way. You are to love Him more than you love your car, house, job, money, wardrobe, or anything else. I once read a convicting, classic book on loving God by Bernard of Clairvaux. He said, "I have three great desires in my soul: to remember God, to contemplate God, and to love God. " How many of us are like that? If we were asked to list the three great desires of our soul, I wonder if those are what they would be.

So, God told Israel, "I put you in a land with milk and honey. I put you in the best place of blessing. You are going to need within you a commitment to love Me. " God told them they would have to show their love for Him outwardly, too, by their. . .

b. Conversation About God

God said in Deuteronomy 6:6-7, "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. "

What are your conversations like? Do you talk about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, or virtue? Do you talk about things that are good, honest, pure, and lovely? Have you ever gone on a trip with somebody for a weekend and not talked about God, spiritual things, or what you are accountable for? If we want to keep what God has blessed us with, we must love God with all of our hearts and talk about Him. I believe one reason that God has allowed Christian radio and tape ministries to develop is to help offset the onslaught of godlessness that comes to people through the radio and television. It used to be that society wasn't bombarded by all that garbage. People used to talk to each other in their homes. Now they have the whole world continuously talking to them about godless things. That makes it difficult for a Christian to make it from Sunday to Sunday without falling away from his commitment to God. To offset the godless things we hear and see today, we are to cultivate a pure

mind and talk about God.

c. Consideration of God

In Deuteronomy 6:8-9, God told the Israelites to use symbols to remind them of Him and His commandments: "And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. " I believe that we should have things in our homes and offices that will make us remember the things we should be thinking about. We need to have reminders around us to help us remember our life commitment. We should love God, talk about Him, and be reminded of Him and His commands by certain symbols around us.

You say, "Why did God say all of that?" Deuteronomy 6:10-12 explains why: "And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which He swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, and houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not, when thou shalt have eaten and be full; then beware lest thou forget the LORD. . . . "

I fear that some of the people that were a part of the building process will forget the way they saw God's work being done at Grace Church. Also, there are many new people that come to the church who don't understand the sacrifice of time, talent, effort, and money that people made while the church was growing. A young couple in the church forfeited their honeymoon because they wanted to give to the church. That is one of many illustrations of sacrifice I could give. People who haven't been a part of the fight involved in building a church take for granted what has already been established. They become picky about little things that go wrong. The book When I Relax I Feel Guilty says they are the ones that are rearranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic while it is sinking (Tim Hansel, [Elgin, Ill. : David C. Cook Pub. Co. , 1979], p. 38). Sometimes a person will get picky about something and I'll say, "I don't care about that! There are other things that are more important!" Some people spend much of their time fooling around with trivial things when they should be more concerned about God's Kingdom.

2. ABOUT CRITICISM

The child of apathy is criticism. It is easy for a person to come to the point where he takes everything for granted, and begins to criticize any imperfections he finds in things. Author Thomas Hardy said he had a friend who could go into any beautiful meadow and immediately find a manure pile. A person shouldn't have that kind of perspective.

3. ABOUT COMPLACENCY

God has given Grace Church many wonderful people, and we thank Him for that. But I know that there are also people who come to church only when it's convenient. For them, going to church is low on the priority list. If they can't afford to go anywhere for a weekend, they come to church. They don't see any need for commitment. Some people don't come to church on Sunday nights. They think one sermon a week is enough. They should be given two hundred sermons in one week to shake them out of their complacency. Kierkegaard said, "People think that the preacher is an actor and they are to come and be his critics. What they don't know is that they're the actors and he's the prompter offstage reminding them of their lost lines. "

It is easy for people to get to the point where they expect things to be done for them. Even Christians have that attitude. They show up for church only if they think they will get something out of it. They don't understand the loyalty of supporting a pastor while he is speaking.

So, I said to the pastor I was golfing with, "Building a church is easy. The hard work begins after the church has grown. It's hard to prevent people from becoming complacent and taking everything for granted. " The teaching and the music we have is great, and there are people who work hard to take care of our children during the worship service. It's easy for us to take them for granted.

4. ABOUT COMMITMENT

Many people don't even pray like they should. Do you pray for your pastor? I am very grateful for the friends I have that pray regularly for me. I know that when I preach, some of you are are grading me on a scale of one to ten. If you think the sermon was good, then that might be enough to make you come back for another good sermon. But do you pray for me? Do you pray for those who lead and serve you? Some people are quick to criticize but not so quick to pray. Do those of you in a leadership position in your church pray for the people you lead? Or do you think that everything is going along well enough and you don't need God anymore?

Some people don't understand the warfare involved in building up a church. They just see all the good things that result from tears and toil, and take them for granted. Some people don't understand that the leaders of a church have to hold each other up because the battle against indifference becomes so difficult. They need you to be a part of what's going on. They need you to be totally committed and prayerful. They need you to use your gifts and serve the church.

A Victim of Apathy

I received a letter from a young pastor that I would like to share with you. My greatest joy in the ministry is to see young men go into the ministry. This letter is from a young man who is thinking

about leaving the ministry, and it broke my heart. This is what he wrote:

This letter comes to your attention for several reasons, and although we have not met personally, I have read some of your books and heard you on the radio several times. Let me explain to you something I'm concerned about that I have not been able to correct and is causing me to consider leaving the ministry. Perhaps the Lord will use your insights to give me some light.

I firmly believe that the leadership of a church should be the very best, not only in their personal spiritual lives, but also in being an example for people they lead. I am not saying that a leader has to be perfect or superhuman, but he should have a living, growing personal relationship with our Lord. I firmly believe that if the leaders of a church don't present a lifestyle of commitment and dedication to their Lord and church, then their followers won't either.

The problem, pastor MacArthur, is that two-thirds of our elected officers attend only one service a week. I'm not saying they all have to be present every time the doors are open, but I do believe that excepting unforeseen situations, illnesses, and vacations, the leadership of a church should make a double effort to be present at the services, if for no other reason than for the encouragement of the saints and the pastor. I find it extremely difficult to believe that proper leadership can be provided when the leaders do not spend enough time with their people to find out what their hurts and fears are. At our board meetings, I find that by far the majority of the time is spent on items that have no direct relationship to the needs and hurts of people. I believe that because of that, our church has come to a stalemate, which is equal to going backwards instead of moving ahead. I have brought those things to the attention of our board on several occasions (even some of the people on our board are not faithful in their attendance), with absolutely no results.

I am not talking about men and women who simply are not able to make it to church, but people who just will not come. Some of the leaders say they are too busy, too tired at the end of the day, or don't even offer an excuse. But those leaders are not afraid to remind me that they are the power of the church. That happens often. I have come to the place where if this continues on into next year, I am ready to resign the pastorate. How is it possible for a pastor to direct his flock, establish the needed programs, and develop spiritual leadership if he can't get other leaders to back him? I'm open to your advice. I believe our church has great possibilities. But as long as we are lukewarm, the Lord will not bless us or use us.

That letter could have been written by thousands of different pastors, because it is common for people to take for granted the good things God has given them. I don't want that to happen at Grace Church. I don't want people to forget the Lord. I want them to continue to fear His name.

Look with me at 2 Peter 1:12. Writing to his congregration, Peter said, "Wherefore, I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and are

established in the present truth. " Peter had a high calling from God, and he didn't want to be irresponsible about how he handled it. He didn't want to be negligent to those he was called to teach, so he continually reminded the people of the things they had already learned. He was saying, "I know that you already know these things, but you need to be reminded about them. " Continuing in verse 13, he said, "Yea, I think it fitting, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance, knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle. . . . I will endeavor that ye may be able, after my decease, to have these things always in remembrance" (vv. 13-15). There is a certain virtue in repeating basic things that shouldn't be forgotten. That is what I'd like to do now as I share with you what is on my heart.

Many pastors come to Grace Church to find out why it grows and what we are doing. They usually come to find out how things are done. They desire to know what God is doing, and some of them think they can pick up methods, tools, programs, and ideas and apply them to their own churches. However, that is like coming to pick up a body and going back home with just the skin. They're looking for the flesh of our ministries, not the internal aspects of them. Beneath the surface of things is a foundation that people don't know about. We try to tell pastors that: They may see a ministry functioning, but it is what is behind the scenes that needs to be understood.

For our study about what a church should have, I am going to use the analogy of a body from the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 12:12-31), and entitle this series "The Anatomy of a Church. " A body has four main features: a skeleton, internal systems, muscles, and flesh. A church needs to have a framework (a skeleton), internal systems (certain attitudes), muscles (different functions), and flesh (the form of the programs). The form cannot be reproduced without the other features of the body. Borrowing from Paul's familiar metaphor of the body, I want to talk first about. . .

II. THE SKELETON

In order for the body to function, it has to have structure. The skeleton is what gives a body structure. I believe there are certain skeletal truths that a church has to be committed to. They are unalterable; they cannot be compromised in any way. When I say that a church has to be committed to those things, I am talking about you and me, beloved. You and I are the church.

The first nonnegotiable requirement of a church is that it have. . .

A. A High View of God

It is absolutely essential that a church perceive itself as an institution for the glory of God. I believe that the church in America has descended from that and become a church that focuses on men. The church thinks its goal is to help people feel better about themselves: It plays psychological games

with people to give them placebos. For example, that would be like trying to patch up a marriage by doing what Maribel Morgan, author of The Total Woman, suggests: Put on a black negligee, stick a rose between your teeth, and wink at your husband from under the dining room table! If you have a rotten marriage, doing that isn't going to help it. The only way you are going to have a good marriage is by establishing it on a biblical foundation and a relationship with God. Placebos aren't the answer.

1. THE PRIORITY

The church has been reduced from an organism that emphasizes knowing and glorifying God to an organization that tries to help people feel better about themselves. But if you know and glorify God, then you will feel better about yourself! If you know God, the needs in your life are answered. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. . . " (Prov. 9:10). When you have a right relationship with God, everything else will fall into its proper place. I am not saying that we are to ignore people's needs. We are to be concerned about people the same way God is. But there is a balance that must be found, and that begins with a high view of God. We must take God seriously.

Sometimes I wish God would strike people dead during the offering. I don't wish that too strongly, but I wish something dramatic would happen to show people that they must take God seriously. When a person dies, we have a tendency to say, "How could God let that happen?" We have no right to ask that. We should ask, "What are we doing alive?" God, being holy, could have destroyed man when he first fell into sin. Just because God is gracious toward us is no excuse for us to be indifferent. God must be taken seriously.

2. THE PROBLEM

a. Specified

I feel a righteous indignation toward preachers and others that take God off His throne and turn Him into a servant who has to do all the things they demand of Him. People are irreverant today; they do not know how to worship God. Some people think that worship means to induce a warm feeling. They know little about God. There are too many Marthas and not enough Marys (Lk. 10:38-42). We are so busy serving all the time that we don't take the time to bow down and wash Jesus' feet. We don't tremble at God's Word. We don't allow ourselves to be confronted by God's holiness and our sinfulness so that we can be usable to Him for His glory. We want to feel good about ourselves. We want to have our needs met and problems solved, and allow the church to be replaced by religious psychology.

You could take most of the books that are being written today, throw them into the sea, and not lose anything. Many of them are just placebos that superficially attack problems that people can't solve. During the eras when the church was holy, Christians had very few books to read, but the books they

did have told them how to have a relationship with God. Most books today don't do that. I was recently told by Moody Bible Institute that a survey given at their last pastors' conference revealed that most pastors need help in dealing with families. I was amazed! I said, "You mean to tell me that even with all the books available about helping families, that's still a problem area?" The answer isn't to write more materials about the family; the problem is that people aren't taking God seriously and walking according to His laws. That's why they get themselves into the mess they're in. It's so important to have a high view of God.

b. Solved

James 4:8 says, "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. . . . " Would you like to live your life with God near you? If you draw close to God, He will come close to you. But you say, "When I get near God, it is easy to become nervous. " That's why James 4:8 also says, ". . . Cleanse your hands, ye sinners. . . . " The closer you get to God, the more you see your sin. Consequently, you will humble yourself and mourn over your sin. James 4:10 says that when you've humbled yourself before the Lord, "He shall lift you up. "

We must take God seriously and exalt Him; we don't want to have a man-centered church. We are to reach out to everyone in the love of Christ, but God is to be the focus of our worship and our life. Therefore, we shouldn't only look at the Bible as a book full of formulas for solving problems; it is a book that reveals God!

The second nonnegotiable truth is that a church must believe in. . .

B. The Absolute Authority of Scripture

1. THE UNDERMINING OF GOD'S WORD

The Bible is constantly being attacked. I recently read in a book review that Lewis Smeeds of Fuller Seminary wrote a book that says it is all right for two men to have a homosexual relationship. If a person wants to advocate that view, all he has to do is disregard the Bible. It is inconsistent for a seminary professor to deny the Bible when he is training men to minister the Word of God! But that is happening today. The Bible is being attacked head on.

I believe that Charismatics attack the Bible when they add all their visions and revelations to it. They say that Jesus told them this, and that God told them that. In the meantime, they are subtly undermining the Bible because they no longer see it as the single authority. One man said that Jesus comes into his bathroom and puts His arm around him while he is shaving. I thought, "Do you keep shaving? If you can keep shaving, then it isn't Jesus. If holy God came into the bathroom while you were shaving, you would fall to the floor so hard that you would kill yourself!" It is an awesome thing

to confront an infinitely holy God! Getting little special messages from God is silliness. God's Word must be held up as the absolute authority.

The Bible is always attacked. The worst attack of all is by people that say they believe the Bible, yet don't know what it teaches. That is the subtlest kind of attack there is. There are people all across America who say, "I believe the Bible from cover to cover," but they don't know one paragraph of it. They believe what they don't know.

2. THE UPHOLDING OF GOD'S WORD

Jesus said, ". . . Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Mt. 4:4). If we are fed by every word that comes out of the mouth of God, then we ought to study every word. Today, preaching has lost that. Many things are preached except the Word of God. We must teach the Bible--every word of it. That is important. It doesn't matter if you don't have an appetite for it.

You say, "I don't need another sermon; I'd rather be fellowshiping. " I hope you enjoy your fellowship, but I'm still going to keep feeding you the Word of God, because that's what makes you grow. Fellowship is important, but it does not replace the Word of God. In fact, I find that the sweetest, purest, and most rewarding fellowship is always with the Scripture. That's where my heart is. I hope that's where your heart is, too. You say, "We already know much of what the Bible says. We have been taught for a long time. " To say something like that is the height of pride! The discovery process never stops--I'm always learning new things from the Bible. The greatest joy of my preaching ministry is to study the Bible and discover things I never saw before. It's the preaching itself that is work to me! Every week of my life I learn something new from the Word that I never fully understood before. That's an adventure that no one should miss!

A pastor in Michigan once told me, "I pastor a church for only two years, and then I leave. " I said, "Have you been doing that for a long time?" He said, "Yes. I spent two years here, two years there, and two years in another place. " I said, "Why?" He said, "I have fifty-two sermons. I preach each one twice, and then I leave. " I said, "Why don't you teach the whole counsel of God?" He said, "I don't teach all of it; I just teach the parts that I think are important. " But every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God is important!

The third thing that a church must have as a part of its skeleton is. . .

C. Sound Doctrine

1. EXPLAINED

If you have a high view of God and are committed to Him, then you must go along with what His Word teaches. The teachings of God's Word make up sound doctrine. Many Christians today are vague about doctrine. There are many of what I call sermonettes for Christianettes--little sermons that are nice and interesting. Sometimes they make you feel warm, fuzzy, sad, or excited. But seldom do we hear doctrine taught or discussed. Very few people explain the truths about God, life, death, heaven, hell, man, sin, Christ, angels, the Holy Spirit, the position of the believer, the flesh, or the world. We need truths that we can hold onto. That's why it's so important to principlize the Bible. You read a text, find out what it says and means, draw out of it a divine truth, and establish that truth in the minds of people by repeating it. That's what I do when I preach. I go through a Bible passage, pull out a divine truth, teach about it using other passages, and explain the truth several different ways until it's established in your minds.

I picked up that style of preaching when I graduated from high school. My father gave me a Bible and wrote a note in it encouraging me to read 1 and 2 Timothy. I did that, and Paul's message to Timothy kept running through my mind: "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, unto which thou hast attained" (1 Tim. 4:6; cf. 1 Tim. 1:3, 10; 4:13, 16).

2. EXEMPLIFIED

Earlier in my ministry at Grace Church, I taught from the book of Ephesians, explaining a believer's position in Christ. That study was foundational to the church. Recently I visited with my high school football coach, whom I hadn't seen for a long time. He is a Christian and also teaches the Word of God--he's a wonderful man. We were reminiscing about some of the silly things that happened when I played football in high school. Then he said to me, "John, you have made concrete for me the position of the believer in Christ. I have listened to your tapes on Ephesians chapter 1 many times and taught from that passage repeatedly over the years to young people. Understanding the doctrine of the believer's position in Jesus Christ has given me a foundation for my entire life. "

I didn't give my coach that foundation; the book of Ephesians and the Holy Spirit did. My point is that people need solid doctrine to build their lives on. I believe we must make principles from the divine truths of the Word of God and teach them, for they are foundational to the Christian life. For example, if you want to learn about angels or demons, then find out the truths the Bible teaches about them. Learning the solid content of the Bible is important.

The fourth nonnegotiable thing that the people of a church should have is. . .

D. Personal Holiness

1. A CONCERN EXPRESSED

We are all victimized by an absolutely unholy society. I cringe when I think of the philosophical and immoral filth that our society creates. Peoples' minds are corrupted and drawn away from God as a result of that. That filth is like the drippings of a broken sewer. In fact, the sewer isn't just broken; it's completely shattered and letting loose a flood. For example, I have a problem with contemporary music not only because I don't like the style of it, but because the sexual innuedos of the words are so vile. I try to explain that to young people and many say, "You don't understand; you're old. What do you know? The words are all right; I take them the way I want. "

We have to draw lines when it comes to personal holiness and be careful what we expose ourselves and our children to. It is impossible to watch some of the films in movie theatres and read trash without paying a price. It is shocking what our society creates. I say to myself, "Where are we in our society?" I stay away from movies so that I don't have to be exposed to such worldliness. I sometimes wonder, "Is that the kind of stuff going through the confused, chaotic minds of kids that expose themselves to such trash?" Christians are called to live a pure life, and we can't compromise that. We should enforce a standard of purity among ourselves.

2. A COMMITMENT EXHORTED

Second Corinthians 7:1 says, "Having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. " A church should enforce that standard (see Mt. 18:15-17). That's why we implement church discipline at Grace Church. If somebody sins, we confront him.

Many Christians aren't as concerned about their personal holiness as they should be. A person's prayer life is one of the things that cultivates holiness. What is your prayer life like? What about your study of the Word of God? Do you fast? How often do you meditate on the Word of God, if at all? You say, "I'm an elder," or "I'm a deacon and I teach a Bible study. " I'm not talking about that; I'm asking, "How often do you meditate for a prolonged period of time, drawing nigh unto God in a prayer that extends beyond a moment? Where are you in terms of holiness and real communion with the living God?" Church leaders aren't the only people that should live holy lives. I should live a holy life, the leaders of a church should live holy lives, and you should live a holy life. We can't just live half-committed Christian lives and expect God's work to be done.

The last thing I want to mention that belongs in the skeletal structure of a church is. . .

E. Spiritual Authority

1. THE OFFICE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERS EXPLAINED

I believe with all my heart that a church must understand that Christ is the head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15), and that He mediates His rule in the church through godly elders (1 Thess. 5:13, 14; Heb. 13:7, 17). The Bible teaches that; I didn't invent it. The Bible says that elders have the rule over the congregation in the Lord. They have authority.

That authority can be abused. There are men who wield it as if it were given to them. But they are not the actual authorities. They are simply supposed to handle the authority of the Word of God. I don't have the authority to tell Grace Church, "Put that building over there," "I want more vacations," "Raise my salary," or "I demand that those walls be painted green. " The only authority I have is to speak and apply the Word of God. When a spiritual leader goes outside of that, then he is going out of the bounds of his authority.

2. THE OBEDIENCE TO SPIRITUAL LEADERS EXPECTED

If you were to do something wrong and continue doing it, that would be disastrous. It is important to confess wrongdoing, and the role of a spiritual leader is to help people get back on the right track and move on for the glory of the Lord. First Thessalonians 5 says to "know them who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. . . . " (vv. 12-13). Hebrews 13:7, 17 says to submit to those over you in the Lord, for they watch your souls. Follow their example.

3. THE OPERATION OF SPIRITUAL LEADERS EXEMPLIFIED

We have many leaders at Grace Church; I'm just one of them. You say, "Why are you the one who always preaches?" That's just the way the gifts work out. Jesus had twelve Apostles. Every time there is a list of them, Peter's name is always first (Mt. 10:2-4; Mk. 3:16-19; Lk. 6:14-16; Ac. 1:13). He was always the spokesman. That doesn't mean he was better than the others. He simply had the gift of speaking, and the others were gifted in other ways.

Peter and John always traveled together. Because of that, you would think that John didn't say much. But he wrote the Gospel of John; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Revelation. There is no doubt that with the intimate friendship he had with Christ, he could have shared more great things. But every time he was with Peter in the first twelve chapters of Acts, he was silent. Why? Because Peter had the gift of speaking.

Barnabas was a great teacher and probably the leading one in the early church. But when Barnabas and Paul traveled together, even unbelievers professed that Paul was the chief speaker.

So, there are variations in the giftedness of spiritual leaders. But in totality, there is still an equality of spiritual authority given to those that the Bible calls elders or overseers.

Let's sum up what we've learned. If the church is going to be the body of Christ, it has to have the right framework. It has to have a high view of God. The pursuit of a church should be to know God. In seeking to know God, the authority of the Scripture must be recognized, for it is through the Bible that we can know God. A church should have a high view of Scripture, and a commitment to the teaching of sound doctrine. The people of a church should also seek personal holiness and submit their souls to the care of those the Lord has placed over them as spiritual authorities.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Describe the characteristics of each of the three generations of a church.

2. Why is it easy for the third generation of people at a church to be apathetic?

3. What was God telling Israel in Deuteronomy 6:3-5? How does that apply to us?

4. According to Deuteronomy 6:6-7, where were the Israelites to keep God's words? Whom were they to teach God's Word to? How often were they to converse about God?

5. Why might have God allowed Christian radio and tape ministries to develop?

6. What was God's command to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6:8-9? How can we apply that today?

7. According to Deuteronomy 6:10-12, why did God command the Israelites all that He did in Deuteronomy 6:3-9?

8. Kierkegaard said, "Some people think that the preacher is an actor and they are to come and be his critics. " What, in reality, is the situation?

9. Some people are quick to _____ and not so quick to _____.

10. What was Peter's message in 2 Peter 1:12? Explain it.

11. What are the four main features of a body? Relate those features to the church.

12. What are the five nonnegotiable necessities of a church's structure?

13. What must a church perceive itself as? In general, what have churches in America descended to?

14. What happens when a person makes a priority of glorifying God and having a right relationship with Him?

15. Explain the specific problem that many churches and Christians have today. Why is that occurring?

16. According to James 4:10, what does God do to people that cleanse themselves of sin in humility?

17. In what ways is the Bible being attacked today?

18. What does Matthew 4:4 say about God's Word? What place does fellowship have in relation to the study of the Word of God?

19. What is sound doctrine?

20. Why do Christians need to be taught sound doctrine?

21. How are people's minds affected by the philosophical and immoral filth that our society creates? How must Christians respond to that kind of influence?

22. Describe the standard that a Christian should have (2 Cor. 7:1). What is one of the things that cultivates personal holiness?

23. Who is the head of the church? Through whom does the head of the church mediate rule over the church? Support your answers with Scripture.

24. Are spiritual leaders the actual authorities of a church? Explain. What does a spiritual leader have the authority to do?

25. What is one role of a spiritual leader? What commands are given to us in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 and Hebrews 13:7, 17 in regard to spiritual leaders?

26. Despite the variations in the giftedness of spiritual leaders, what is true about their authority?

Pondering the Principles

1. Read about the different generations of a church on page 2. Which generation is your church in right now? If your church is working now to discover and establish the truth, are you helping it along with that? What is your attitude toward learning the truths of the Bible and making them foundational to your church and personal life? If your church is fighting to maintain and proclaim the truth, are you actively helping the church with those goals? Does your life display a continual obedience to God's Word? Are you involved in teaching or sharing the gospel with others? If you go to a church that is well- established and has excellent programs, are you actively involved in those programs? Do you take time to pray for those who work hard behind the scenes? How much commitment do you have to your church? Take time now to evaluate the place that your church is at in terms of its growth. What can you do to help it be the church that it should be?

2. Bernard of Clairvaux said, "I have three great desires in my soul: to remember God, to contemplate God, and to love God. " Can you honestly say that you have those same desires? Do you show your love for God? How? Ask God to help you focus on Him in the way that you should.

3. There are five foundational things that a church must be committed

to: a high view of God, a belief in the absolute authority of Scripture, a commitment to teaching sound doctrine, the personal holiness of its people, and the establishment of spiritual leaders. Of the five items listed above, take one item at a time and explain what problems could arise if that item were missing in a church.

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