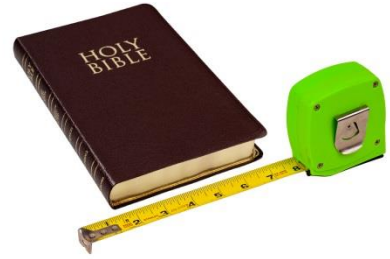


• LESSON 12 •

# Working in the Light of God's Authority as a Church



**W**hat is the mission of the church? A wide spectrum of answers would be offered from across the religious landscape.

- ❖ Social services
- ❖ Disaster and poverty relief
- ❖ Business ventures
- ❖ Secular education
- ❖ Politics
- ❖ Recreation

Foundational to God-shaped respect for authority is humble recognition and consistent awareness that the church belongs to God.

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:15-23)

The Spirit of God has clearly communicated the means by which

What sort of answers might you get if you were to sit down with a group of friends, co-workers, or neighbors and ask them, “What is the mission of the church?”

Is it a big deal if, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we redefine the mission of the church? If so, why?

When Paul writes that Jesus is the head of the church, what is he communicating?

the people of God can enjoy unity in the service of God.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1-3)

We are the recipients of a calling *from* God. We are to eagerly maintain the unity defined by the Holy Spirit *of* God. We are to enjoy and promote the bond of peace graciously made available to us *by* God. This is all about God! And this is the practical means God has provided so that his children might enjoy constructive unity:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:4-6)

The one body—which is the church—recognizes Jesus Christ as “head over all things to the church” (Eph 1:22-23). It’s not up to us to define or modify the nature, the mission, or the means of carrying out the work of the Lord’s church. It has been a part of God’s eternal purpose all along.

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. (Eph 3:7-12)

Who do we think we are—limited in every way—to be so bold as to disregard the instructions and authoritative examples that have been preserved concerning the Lord’s church?

In your own words, what is “the unity of the Spirit” and why are Christians expected to eagerly maintain it?

What should we take away from the straightforward declaration that, by God’s design, there is:

- One body –
  
- One Spirit –
  
- One hope –
  
- One Lord –
  
- One faith –
  
- One baptism –
  
- One God –

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 2:4-5)

What is the God-defined mission of the Christ-centered individuals who make up this spiritual house?

## Devotion to Fellowship

From the beginning of the life of the Lord's church:

...they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)

...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor 1:9)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

## Edification

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no

Why does Peter specify that the aim of our spiritual sacrifices ought to be those which are “acceptable to God”?

In your own words, what is “fellowship”?

Why is it important that disciples of Christ be “devoted” to fellowship?

In your own words, what is “edification”?

longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph 4:11-16)

## **Evangelism**

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:15-16)

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20)

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. (1 Thes 1:8)

And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. (Phil 4:15-16)

## **Benevolence**

Local churches engaged in a limited amount of benevolent work under the guidance of the apostles.

- ❖ The earliest believers in Jerusalem sold property and belongings in order to share with those who had need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37).

Why does edification matter in the life and health of a local church?

In your own words, what is “evangelism”?

Does evangelism still matter? If so, why?

In your own words, what is “benevolence”?

- ❖ When Greek-speaking Jewish widows were being neglected, the disciples in Jerusalem made special efforts to immediately correct the situation (Acts 6:1-6).
- ❖ Paul outlined specific instructions concerning the church caring for widows “who are truly widows” (1 Tim 5:3-16).
- ❖ During the reign of Claudius Caesar, a great famine came over all the world and seriously affected Christians in Judea. In response, disciples in Antioch determined to send a contribution for their relief. “And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:27-30).
- ❖ Years later, churches in the regions of Macedonia and Achaia made contributions for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Rom 15:25-27; 2 Cor 8-9).

**CLOSING THOUGHT:** Paul’s reasoned plea in 1 Timothy 5:16 continues to be worthy of careful thought and humble application: “Let the church not be burdened.” Let the church be the church. There isn’t anything inherently wrong with social services, disaster relief, business ventures, secular education, politics, or recreation. We can be appropriately engaged in any or all of these efforts as individual disciples of Jesus. But we must not saddle the church with responsibilities which the head of the church never gave it. Let us never forget his unashamed profession before Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

Other religious organizations may burden themselves with all manner of worldly interests, responsibilities, and gimmicks. But they are not our standard or competition.

I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Tim 3:14-15).

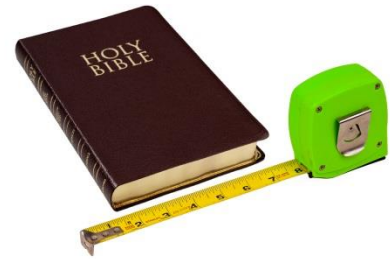
Why did local churches engage in a “limited amount” of benevolent work under the guidance of the apostles? In what way was it limited?

How does Acts 4:32-5:11 demonstrate a difference between the church and an individual? Notice especially Peter’s words in 5:4.

How should Jesus’ words in John 18:36 function to keep us focused when it comes to our conception of the God-defined mission of the church?

• LESSON 13 •

# Traveling the Ancient Paths in a Postmodern Age



**I**n his second letter to young Timothy, the apostle Paul wrote of truly difficult days to come.

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men. (2 Tim 3:1-9)

In 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Paul continued:

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Even though these words are nearly 2,000 years old, with striking accuracy they describe our own day and age.

Interestingly, more than 500 years before Paul, the prophet Jeremiah diagnosed much the same catastrophic phenomenon in foretelling the impending destruction of Jerusalem.

“For from the least to the greatest of them,  
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;

Jannes and Jambres are the names given in early extrabiblical Jewish writings to the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses in Exodus 7:8-13. Why would Paul bring them up in the context of 2 Timothy 3?

In what way do we see, in our own time, exactly what Paul was foretelling?

and from prophet to priest,  
everyone deals falsely.  
They have healed the wound of my people lightly,  
saying, 'Peace, peace,'  
when there is no peace.  
Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?  
No, they were not at all ashamed;  
they did not know how to blush.  
Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;  
at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,"  
says the LORD. (Jer 6:13-15)

## Our Postmodern Age

Today, we continue to see and feel the effects of great shifts in cultural sentiments and sensibilities leading to social, moral, and ethical drifts. Unchecked, these drifts naturally lead further and further away from God.

"Postmodernism" is a broad term many are using to describe the trends of our own modern culture. Postmodernist approaches to life are typically critical of the possibility of objective knowledge and absolute truth. Pilate's question lives on as the heartbeat of postmodernist thought: "What is truth?"

Postmodernist philosophy frequently draws critical attention to the ways in which social dynamics such as authority and hierarchy affect human interaction and relationships. In contrast to the "modernist" paradigm which emphasized knowledge and science, postmodernist thought often emphasizes pluralism, relativism, and syncretism in its approaches to knowledge and understanding. This cultural cocktail has come to produce an intense sense of skepticism in the hearts of many, especially those who are younger.

Take a moment to reflect on the three cultural trends mentioned below. How have you personally observed them at work in the world around you? Are they dangerous? If so, in what ways? Can you think of anything in the Bible (commands, examples, outright warnings, principles, inferences) that speak to these ancient and modern trends?

Are there those who continue to say, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace? If so, in what ways?

"They did not know how to blush?" What did Jeremiah mean? Does the same problem continue in our own culture? If so, how? Why?

How has much of the postmodern drift been fueled by a lack of fundamental respect for authority?

- ❖ **Pluralism** is the notion that all religious belief systems and philosophies are of equal validity.
  
- ❖ **Relativism** is the idea that there is no truth, only truths. There are no principles, only preferences. There is no grand reason, only reasons. There is no privileged civilization, only a multitude of cultures, beliefs, periods, and styles. There is no grand narrative of humanity, only countless stories of where people and their cultures have been and are now. There is no simple reality or any grand objectivity of universal, detached knowledge, only a ceaseless representation of everything in terms of everything else. Therefore, all moral, ethical, or spiritual beliefs and practices are equally credible, viable representations of proper behavior, interaction, and living.
  
- ❖ **Syncretism** is the effort to fuse differing systems of belief, superstition, and tradition into something more generally palatable for the masses.

Ironically enough, these cultural trends and drifts that define much of the postmodern cultural and religious landscape are not nearly as unique to the 21st century as we might be led to believe. “Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new’? It has been already in the ages before us” (Eccl 1:10). Those words are 3,000 years old.

Most of the people of Jeremiah’s day were failing in their struggle against the same basic trends. Paul urgently brought the same basic temptations to the attention of Timothy. When people do not see fit to acknowledge God, regardless of how wise they may claim to be, they play the part of the garden-variety fool (Rom 1:18-32).



## The Ancient Paths

It is no coincidence that, though the sad descriptions were given more than 500 years apart, God's remedy in the days of Jeremiah and Paul was the same.

Thus says the LORD:

“Stand by the roads, and look,  
and ask for the ancient paths,  
where the good way is; and walk in it,  
and find rest for your souls.” (Jer 6:16)

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. (2 Tim 3:16-4:2)

**The antidote is God-shaped respect for authority.**

We can hardly put it more simply than did God's own Son in Matthew 7:24-27.

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Even though we read his words 2,000 years later, they bring us to the same fundamental fork in the road.

When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority... (Matt 7:28-29)

God's authority is the bedrock. Will we recognize it, submit to it, and build our lives on it?