

# LESSON ESSENTIALS

## THE CHURCH AND WORSHIP

### LESSON 4: WHAT A HEALTHY CHURCH LOOKS LIKE

When a church gets unhealthy, the temptation for many is to complain about it, to blame others for it, or simply walk out on it. None of these are godly responses. What should we do if we are in an unhealthy church, and what can we do to foster church health in the first place?

The Body of Christ ought to be the most beautiful, peaceable, harmonious group of people on the planet. And to be sure, it most often is. However, because we are still fallen, imperfect people, the church is still an imperfect place.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,”

John 13:34-35

He instructs us to love one another as He loved us. How did He love us? He loved us by laying down His life for us; by being willing to be falsely accused by us; by taking the blame for things that were not His fault for us, and more.

Jesus, speaking to His disciples, said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,” (John 13:34-35). By extension, He is speaking to us as well. We are under this new commandment to love one another. By doing so, we will show the world that we are Christ’s disciples and we will develop a healthy church environment. This is a high calling, to be sure. But it cannot be that difficult, can it?

If you have been in a church for any length of time, you know that personalities can clash, vision or ideologies can conflict, and ideas and plans can counteract each other. This can cause untold strife among even the most loving and thoughtful people. When this happens, it is easy to point fingers and to blame others for the tension. It is easy to accuse the church of failing you and of not meeting your needs. But if we reread the passage from John 13, we see that that reaction to an unhealthy church is not what Christ envisioned for His people.

He instructs us to love one another as He loved us. How did He love us? He loved us by laying down His life for us; by being willing to be falsely accused by us; by taking the blame for things that were not His fault for us, and more. Instead of passing the blame onto others, Jesus willingly suffered injustice to bring peace to our situation. While there are certainly times to protect oneself in a confrontational scenario, most of our church disagreements could be subsided by us having the humility to be wronged for the greater good.

In fact, in a most powerful portion of scripture, we are instructed as to how we ought to deal with difficult people. This primarily speaks to how we ought to deal with our enemies, so how much more so ought we to apply these loving principles to our brothers and sisters within our church family? Romans 12:9-21 reads as follows: “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it

is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

This scripture is a prescription for increasing the health of a church. If all the members acted this way, surely we would avoid most, if not all, of the conflicts that plagued our congregations. Notice that nowhere in that passage are we instructed to blame others, to accuse others, or to complain about others when they do not meet our needs and expectations. Rather, we are called to love others, even when they misunderstand and hurt us. Is this not the example Jesus set? We are to rejoice with others, to have empathy for others, to live in harmony with others, to honour others.

Still, do notice that onus for perfect peace is not entirely upon your shoulders. It says, "So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." That is to say, even if you are consistently pursuing peace, you are not to be held solely responsible for any lack of peace or ongoing strife. Every Christian in the church ought to be obeying the instructions in this passage. If you find yourself in an extremely unhealthy church, and you seem to be the only one pursuing peace, do not take upon yourself any guilt for the continuing struggles. Trust the Lord to do His work in that place by His Spirit, while you strive to faithfully obey His Word.

If you are going to speak to leadership about the health of the church, do so with respect and honour for the leadership. Even if you are correct in your assessments of the church, and even if you are completely innocent of any wrongdoing, you can contribute to the lack of health by coming to the leadership with a divisive spirit and critical attitude. Ensure that the changes and improvements that you are seeking are about the glory of God and his renown, and not for your personal comfort or your church's reputation in and of itself. Be prepared to do work yourself to help bring about positive, God-honouring change.

Above all this, remember that the Lord loves His Church. He calls it His bride. He is surely more invested in the health and strength of the Church than we are. Therefore, we can rejoice as we remember how "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any

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such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish," (Ephesians 5:25-27).

## IN REVIEW

- Pursuing peace as a means to develop the health of the church is the responsibility of all Christians, but is an ongoing battle as we are still imperfect people.
- An unhealthy church is a poor testimony to unbelievers as it is by our love for one another that we will be recognized as disciples of Christ.
- It is critically important that we do not complain, accuse, or blame when the church gets unhealthy, but that we love one another as Christ loved us, and that we respond with peace, humility, and honour as we seek out solutions to the issues.

## HAVE YOUR SAY

- What is the state of health of your church? Are you contributing to its health or its lack of health? Pray for a love for the church and for a willing spirit to pursue peace.
  
- Reread the Romans 12 passage. Which of these instructions could you be more diligent in applying? Pray for the Spirit to spur you on to “love and good deeds” and to live this scripture out in your church.
  
- Praise the Lord for His love of His Church. Thank Him that He has accomplished His good plans and that the Church, though imperfect now, will be presented to Christ blameless and without blemish on the last day!

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