

## The State of the Church Part 2

*The State of the Church*

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Ministry of the church and so we took those surveys and began working on them and Ray Gentry, who I mentioned, I introduced last week, was here is a pastoral consultant that's helping us. He's actually a man who's been a minister for close to 50 years and has worked in leadership in various churches in many ways and is a gifted administrator and he is helping us look at those things. And then the sabbatical, I had time to really reflect on things raised. The ministry was slowed down a little bit because if you recall his daughter April, her cancer became much worse in May, and then she passed away in June, and so he and Deborah have been through a lot of grief and, of course, praising God for the hope of the gospel and that April is now in the presence of Christ. But it slowed things down but the Lord's sovereign rule is always over all events, and so sabbatical allowed me for some more time and we're now getting back together and talking about things as we go forward. But I wanted to share with you how I see the state of the church, and remembering part of what I want to do is, as I told you last week, and if you haven't heard last week's message, I would encourage you to go on the website, watch it, because I think it's helpful to get the whole picture, but I basically said what I wanted to do is think about how we got here, where we are, and where we go from here. And so we want to talk about how we got here because we want to remember where we came from as a church and give God praise and glory for the things that he's done, the wonderful things that he's done. We want to always be remembering and praising God. That's what the Scriptures call us to do continually, to reflect, to think back. There's power in that. And so I want us to be encouraged about where we are because I think, as I said last week, the two words I shared last week about where we are, we're a healthy, healthy and stuck. The healthy means I think we're a very healthy church in many, many ways, but there's a sense in which we're stuck and we need to move and to make some adjustments in our church culture, in our underlying commitments so that we can continue to be and grow into the church God wants us to be.

And so I'm sharing each week some of the things that really the focus is what do we need to do, but I don't want us to lose sight of the fact that we continually should be praising God for where we are. It's not just about what we need to do better, it's praising the Lord for where we are, remembering there's power in remembering, not forgetting the great works of God. That's what you see the psalmist, there are things we forget, we're to forget what lies behind in many ways and press on toward what lies ahead but we see that

Scriptures calling us to remember Jesus Christ, to remember, Paul says that to Timothy, remember where you've come from, what you were formerly as you go forward so that you can continue to give God glory for all that he's done. And today, especially September 11th, is a day about remembering, isn't it? 21st anniversary of the destruction of the World Trade Centers, the attack on the Pentagon. I remember so much right after that happened and for the years that followed, we'll never forget, we'll never forget. I think in many ways many people have forgotten and many don't even know what it's about, though it's only 21 years ago. September 11, 2001, most of you who are old enough to remember, you remember where you were when you got the news. A Tuesday morning, pretty day on the East Coast, 19 Islamic terrorists boarded four different planes that took off from the East Coast to the West Coast. They chose, you know, flights that covered the entire country so that they would have full fuel tanks, and then they took over those flights by killing the pilots and the flight attendants, and then they steered those planes into buildings. The first plane struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center, 8:46 AM. The second plane struck the South Tower at 9:03 AM. Fires were raging in those buildings. People were wondering what in the world is going on. Firefighters, first responders, police officers began racing up and down those towers, getting people down to safety. And when the structural integrity of those buildings was destroyed by the intense heat of the flames and so the building collapsed suddenly, remember watching that happen, right? You were watching it and we saw it in real time. 343 firefighters died, 60 police officers and thousands of innocent people in the World Trade Center. Not long after that, a plane struck the Pentagon and 125 workers for the US military were killed. The fourth flight which left Newark, NJ, the passengers had time to learn through their cell phones what had happened in the other planes and they realized that the hijackers were going to take their flight, their plane, and fly it into a building, and so they rushed the cockpit in such numbers that they overwhelmed the hijackers and the plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania rather than its intended destination. They intended either for the White House or the Capitol. That kind of the hatred that motivated those men, 19 Islamic terrorists from Al Qaeda, most from wealthy families in the Middle East and weren't motivated by poverty, were motivated by hatred toward America and the American way. On the 14th, Friday, George Bush stood atop the rubble there at Ground Zero and through a bullhorn he said, "I can hear you," and encouraging the workers that were desperately trying to find bodies. And remember, they pulled people out from the wreckage, still alive. "I can," he said to them, "I can hear you, the rest of the world has heard you, and the people who knocked down this building will hear from all of us." And so America launched the War on Terror, entered Afghanistan seeking to retaliate against Al Qaeda and those terrorists, and for ten years they searched Obama, I mean Osama bin Laden was on the run and then, finally, he came to justice when a team of Navy SEALs found him and the group he was with, and in a gunfight killed him.

So that 21 years ago that happened and the way that it shaped our lives, it made it so that we for weeks and even months after that, we were wondering, where's the next shoe going to drop? What's the next attack going to be? We didn't know that was going to be it, that that one day was going to be it because we felt like it could happen anytime. And in fact, there have been a number of terrorist attacks that have been stopped by our government in the intervening years. But it showed us how frail life is and remembering

that and how quickly things can change and how grateful we should be for those who do run into buildings to save lives like the police officers and the firemen that gave themselves, and many heroes that day. Well, it's good to remember that and to be reminded of God's goodness to us, that these things don't happen more often. That's really a surprising thing. That's actually what I preached the Sunday after that was that one of the main points was it's really amazing that things like this don't happen more often because of the hatred and evil in men's hearts. God's restraining grace. So it's good to remember and it's good to praise God and so we want to do that today as we look at the church.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer and ask his blessing on our time together.

*Father, we do thank You this morning for Your faithfulness and, Lord, we praise You even as we remember a tragic moment, Lord, for so many, so many families were devastated by loss that day. We stand in awe of You and Your great mercy and grace that You by Your continual governance of all things, You don't allow these things to happen very often, Lord. We rejoice in Your goodness. We ask You to continue to bless, Lord, our country, the countries of the world, but we particularly ask today, Lord, that You would help us and all people be more mindful of the shortness of life, the reality of sin, the coming judgment, and the need for repentance in faith in Christ. We pray, Lord, that You would help Your church to be all that You want it to be as we reflect on where we are and how we have gotten to where we are, what we need to do. We pray that You would make us more the people individually You want us to be and corporately help us to look more and more like Jesus. We pray in His name. Amen.*

So the state of the church. The state of the church and I want to, again, take a little time to talk about how we got here, where we are, and where we're going. Those are the three main points again but we're going to spend a lot of time on that third point where we're going or how we get unstuck, basically. But I think it's important to continue to celebrate some of the things that God has done in the past that help us understand why we kind of are where we are.

I mentioned last time some of the things that happened between 2000 and 2002. I talked about the kind of the exodus that happened from the church when we were really, really trying to decide where we're going as a body, and I mentioned that seven out of nine key leaders left in an 18-month period, so that between 2000 and 2002 we found ourselves as a radically different, much smaller church but we saw that we had a common vision among the remnant, so to speak, that was still there. One of the things that happened in 2002 that led to something, I think one of the things I would say is a strength of our church, you know, I said that we're a healthy church in many ways, is the strength of male leadership in our church is something I'm very grateful for and I would say we have wonderful mature believers all across the board. We have, you know, wonderful, godly ladies in our vibrant ladies' ministry. I know that the men in our church are the ones especially there in leadership are so grateful for their wives, and we see the way the Lord has made us a team. Your wife is your helper in your ministry, that's why she's called a helper suitable, exactly what you need, and the more you understand that the more

effective you become. But one of the things that I'm really grateful for is that the Lord does mean for families and the church to be led by strong, godly men. This is his design. It's not politically correct at all, but it doesn't matter because God doesn't care if he's politically correct. In fact, in a world that is filled with sinners and that Satan is the god of this age, why would we expect that we would ever judge by what the world has to say? The prince of darkness rules over this world. He's the ruler of this world. But we want to understand it biblically. We understand biblically kind of male leadership we're supposed to have. It's humble servant, Christ-like leadership in the home. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church. What an astounding statement. How is that possible? As Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Love your wives sacrificially. But male leadership is so key, and one of the things that I think has strengthened our church and made our church what it is today is strong leadership, strong, godly men supported by strong, godly women, but I want to tell you how kind of how we got here, some more of the story of how we got here.

So 2000 and 2002, we're trying to get, you know, get our bearings. People are leaving. Like I said last week, people are getting on the lifeboats. We're staying behind and it's like we're going to go down with the ship is what it feels like, and some of you stayed with us. And like I said, we sure appreciated the company as we go down. But no, the Lord started then rebuilding the church but it was slow and one of the things that really was an encouragement to me was in 2002, March of 2002, really just right out of the fire of that time, I went to my first Shepherds Conference. Shepherds Conference is a conference that John MacArthur leads at Grace Community Church in California, Los Angeles, CA and there's about 3,000 people there, maybe 2,500 pastors and 500 wives at that first one I went to. And then in 2003 we went back a second time, this time Patti went, Ted and Jennifer Guthrie were there as well, and so we went to these Shepherds Conferences and you got to hear wonderful preaching, like-minded churches where we were trying to go, we were trying to be more biblical, more faithful in Scriptures and so such a tremendous shot in the arm.

Well, in 2003 they announced in March of 2003, my second Shepherds Conference, they announced a new training opportunity that summer in July 2003 that was called the Expositors Institute. That was the first one they ever held. They only held, I think maybe a handful of these, three or four, maybe five, but the first one was in 2003. And so they announced it at the Shepherds Conference and they say, "Listen, we're going to do this Expositors Institute. It's a week-long training. There's some significant cost involved but it's going to be a week and no more than 20 people, no more than 20 pastors are going to be accepted into this Institute per year so we can have a small group deal, and we're going to go out to, you go to Grace Community Church and you spend the week with John MacArthur and the staff of the church." Well, I thought when I heard it, that sounds awesome. Well, the brothers that were with me there said, "Hey, would you like to do that?" I said, "Well, yeah, I'd love to do that." They said, "We're going to make that happen."

So they made it happen and so I went to the first Expositors Institute in July 2003. Before I get there, though, I want to tell you one of the things that happened in the intervening

months between March and July. March, I met someone at the Shepherds Conference that was local to Atlanta, a man named Paul Sager, who works, was the head of Biblical Ministries Worldwide, a missions agency, and some of our missionaries are still with Biblical Ministries Worldwide. And so I met Paul at the conference. We talked for a minute and he said, "Let's get together when we get back to Atlanta." And so we exchanged numbers and stuff and so we ended up getting together. It was probably May, late May when we got together, and so a couple months later, you know, by the time we get our calendar synced and we had lunch together. And so Paul is talking to me about, "Hey, what's going on at Providence?" I'm telling him the story right after coming out of that, you know, time where everybody is exiting and, you know, we don't have anything going on other than Sunday morning church. We might have started back Sunday school. About this time we started back Sunday school because we didn't have enough workers to do Sunday school; we barely had enough to just keep a nursery so everything was scaled back to nothing. And so Paul and I were talking and he was telling me, "Well, you're really in a great place because most guys who go into churches, it takes a long time to turn a moving ship but when everybody, everything is already knocked out, you can build it up from the ground." And so I was like, "Well, I don't feel the way you feel about the place I'm in right now, but I'm glad somebody has a positive outlook on this." But anyway, I was encouraged by that and I said, "Well, Paul, what would you do?" He was talking about their ministry, Biblical Ministry Worldwide is they train missionaries to go into areas and then really work on developing indigenous leadership, you know, don't just be the American missionary that stays for 40 years in a place and pastors the church, raise up people and make that leadership local. That's really more of a biblical mindset. That's what Paul and Barnabas did, they went and they took the gospel, they raised up and appointed elders and they left. Now they checked back and they came back through and all of that, but you raise up indigenous leadership. So he's talking about how to do that and so in the conversation he said to me. I said, "Hey, Paul, what would you do first with where I am?" And he said, "I would start a men's Bible study." And he said, and I remember the discussion well, it was you need to focus on the head, the heart and the hands. You want to change what people think, you want to get to the hearts so that you're really seeing true, lasting change in their lives, and you also want to make it practical. So you want to focus all these three things, the head, the heart in the hands, and he said enough that it just kind of was clear in my mind.

So anyway, that's May. July I head out to the Expositors Institute for this week of time with MacArthur and other people on staff out there. And so we get there and John teaches the first day, that Monday, we go on Sunday night and Monday morning at 9:00 o'clock we are in the conference room at Grace Community Church. And so John is teaching. He's like closer to me than that piano and I'm like, "Wow, I can't believe it. That's John MacArthur." And so he's teaching, then we have some of the other staff members, and then Tuesday all day we have Steven Lawson there. Steve Lawson, he had just been fired from his church in Mobile, AL because of his theology. They rejected his Reformed theology and fired him. And so in the aftermath of that, losing his job, his boys happened to be at the Master's University, he'd gotten to know John, and so he, John and he had become good friends, he'd spent some time out there, was spending time out there that summer just really just kind of healing and talking ministry with the other guys on staff,

and so John asked him to teach a lot of our sessions. And so we've got to hear John and Steve and it was incredible. I mean, Steve Lawson, he was coming out of brokenness because what he had been through. He shared his story and it made it such a comfort to me having just come through that fire hearing him talk about his fire and what he'd gone through. And he was also, he's also an amazingly funny guy. And we were laughing, we were crying. It was just really awesome.

I remember one time he was talking about and one of the guys on staff at Grace Community had actually been in Mobile when he went through what he went through to get fired, and this guy just joined the staff of Grace Community right before we go out there, Dan Dumas is his name. And so Dan, his wife had worked for Steve as his secretary at the church, though they didn't attend that church, they were at another ministry. So Dan knew Steve really well, knew what was going on, and so now Dan's in the room, Steve telling us the story, and he's talking about how things just went from bad to worse at Dauphin Way Baptist in Mobile as people got word out. He said they actually had a picture in the newspaper of him and John Calvin side-by-side, Steve Lawson and John Calvin, "Is this man dangerous for Mobile?" How the Baptist church got that kind of coverage in Mobile, AL?

Anyway so he's telling us that and he said that, you know, the way Baptist churches work a lot of times Southern Baptist polity, it's not always this way, but it's pretty common to see this, that every person on the roll has a vote in a meeting and so it doesn't matter whether they've been in church in years, if they're on the roll they have a vote. And so they were able, his opponents were able to get enough people together to vote him out, and it was they were expecting it anytime. Every time he went into pulpit, you could call it the way it worked at their church, you could call a meeting instantly, basically. You could say at the end of the service, "I want to call a meeting and right now we're having a membership meeting right now." And so a member calls a meeting, "And I've got a motion. I'd like to fire the pastor." So it could happen anytime. So he said every time he got ready to preach, he was going into this opposition knowing that it could happen anytime. And so he at this point he's talking about how hard it was for him, but then he, in his sense of humor, he said, you know, Dan would be there sometimes encouraging him, and it was one Wednesday night he was there and he said Dan was over there and he's like rubbing my shoulders, you know, kind of like a boxer getting ready to go out into the ring. "You know what they're saying about you, Steve? They're saying you have a low view of God, brother. They're saying you have a low view of God." You know, getting him all worked up so got then really at the high view of God.

But it was such a such an encouragement and just a time of laughing, and a lot of the guys that were at this training opportunity were just like me, they had been through fires. In fact, there was one man who on Friday, well, let me hold that thought. I've got to get us to the point. I've got to go through Wednesday before I get to Friday. So anyway, it was a wonderful time. Well, one of the other guys and I asked Steve to go to for coffee on Wednesday. We had a break during the day and so we went out for coffee and we asked him, "Hey, what, you know," I think it was my buddy asked, "Well, what's some, you know, with where our churches are what would you think are key things we should

do?" And Steve said, "Listen, the first thing I would do is start a men's Bible study." And he didn't say head, heart and hands, but it was like, mind, you know, affections and focus on the mental, you know, the spiritual and the practical. And the way he said it I was like I'm seeing head, heart, hands, men's Bible study. Wow, that's amazing.

So anyway, so now that's Wednesday afternoon. Friday morning we had the opportunity to go to John MacArthur's home and we spend the morning in his den and he's talking to us and he's sitting at one end of the den and he's sharing a little bit of the story of Grace Community and talking about some of the things that they're doing and things he's been through, things he's learned. And it's Q&A then and so one of the guys, I talked about how some of the guys have been through some painful circumstances, one of the gentlemen who was there says John had said something and this is how he said it, he said, "That's easy for you to say, John, because you're here at Grace Community Church but we have to go back home to our churches." I remember thinking, "Who are you? You're talking to John MacArthur like that?" But anyway, so he said that and John was so gracious in the way he responded. He said, "I understand that you're in a difficult situation." Then he kind of went through some of the stuff that they had in the first seven years of his ministry because he was almost fired at Grace Community Church. There was a rebellion against him as well. But he said, they said, "You know, what should we do to change the culture of our churches. You know, where do you start?" He said, "The first thing I would do," you know the answer, "start a men's Bible study and teach systematic theology to the men." So you grow up the men because leadership is what is needed for the church. So invest in men that will raise up leadership and then the wives and the children will come along and the church will be strong.

So I thought after that's over, I'm sitting there as he's saying this and I'm just in awe and I'm like, "Wow. I think I know what I need to do when I get home." So I told the guys when I got home and I started a men's Bible study that fall, fall of 2003 teaching systematic theology, and we've gone through systematics, now we're on our second time through. We don't go at a real fast pace. You're welcome to join us. We really dig in. And so I get a lot of grief over how long it takes us to go through the book, although the book's like this big anyway, so you know. We use Wayne Grudem. It's not my, he's not my favorite in a lot of ways. His systematic is one of my favorites for this reason, I disagree with him on some areas of doctrine, but it's so devotional in its approach so that it puts the head with the heart in that sense and that's why we use it even though there are areas where I have to teach some things that are different than he comes at it.

Well, that was something I think that was just such a blessing to our church and for 20 years now, in 19 years we've been doing that, and this is actually starting the 20th year. Friday we'll start the 20th year of the men's Bible study at Providence. So it's a priority to me and has been and I think that's been something that God has used. Now that said, I think one of the things that we have not done as well is really the practical aspect, the hands or areas as we've thought about it. You know the head and the heart, we're doing pretty good, but we need to get better at the hands part of that and so that's something that I see. But I want to praise the Lord and give him glory for that, because I think we have such wonderful, godly men in our church, and I'm so thankful for you brothers who walk

alongside me, elders, deacons, and just wonderful, godly men. I think our church compares so well to every other church I've been around. When I was visiting churches, I wanted to come back here. I mean, they did some things, "I like this, I like that. This is wonderful, but I want to go home and be with our people," because you are such a blessing.

Now that said so that's kind of how we got here again, where we are, okay, we are healthy but we still are stuck in some ways and so I want to now move to the point where we go from here and talk about, I shared last week, part of what we need to do is we need to seek to think differently about some things. You know, every church has a culture, every group of people develops a culture, every family has a culture, certainly every society has cultures, a shared culture, and the individual cultures within and culture basically is a way of describing shared beliefs, shared values, shared customs, practices, things that we share in common makes a culture. And so every church has a culture and much of our culture is healthy but there's some areas we need to make some changes. And so that's why I mentioned last time the concept of ministry mind shift and I borrowed that term from Colin Marshall and Tony Payne in their book "The Trellis and the Vine." They talk about this ministry mind shifts to move from one way of doing things to another. Last time we talked about the way we think about gaps and gifts. Don't just focus on gaps to fill, but on gifts to place and to use. And we also talked about moving from being risk averse to being bold in faith.

Today I want to talk about, I think that we'll spend most, all of the rest time we have today on one more and that is from Ephesians 4:1 to 16. We'll read the text and I'll give you this mind shift I think we need to have again. Ephesians 4:1. As we read this again, just look at the beauty and glory of the church. What an amazing creation of God, the church of Jesus Christ. Paul says in verse 1.

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. 7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men." 9 (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.) 11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.



14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; 15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

This glorious picture of the church, the church is the body of Christ. The church itself is pictured as a body here in this chapter, 1 Corinthians 12, another chapter where you see this vivid description of the church as the body and every individual member as a member of the body. The same way that we need each member of our bodies, the church needs each member of its body, and as we work together, we then are the actual physical body of Christ, as it were, in the world; that Jesus, by his Spirit animating us through his word, transforming us day by day, is using us to touch lives. He's practically doing it through us, through you, through the church. He's using the various gifts that we have to touch sinners, to touch broken people in ways that they can feel that they have been touched by Christ himself. That's what he's saying. There's a sense in which every single, the destiny of every single believer is individually – listen to this – the destiny of every single believer, the will of God for you if you belong to Jesus Christ, is that you be conformed to his image individually. Do you want to know what the will of God in your life is? That's it right there, be more like Christ. That's his agenda every moment of every day. It's not to make you happy. It's not to make you always physically healthy. But it is to make you more like Jesus because that is the very best thing that can happen to you and me. That is our eternal destiny.

Now listen to this, it is also a sense according to this passage, the will of God for us as a body is so that we as a corporate entity, we will look more like Jesus and that is an awesome, awesome reality. That as you and I learn to do what this text is saying, that we're connected to the head, we're speaking the truth in love, we're building one another up, what's happening is we're using our gifts in the body, each of us the gift that Christ has given us, we're edifying and encouraging and then helping one another and what happens is we then are being built up and we go out into the world and we touch people and they feel like they've been touched by Jesus. And then our various gifts get to work on different people, and they really have been touched by Jesus because all the different gifts that Jesus had in perfection are evident in us in varying measures. This is the will of God.

Now that said, we need to change the way we see what we're called to do and so I want to talk about this, particularly the key phrase or a key clause, the equipping of the saints for the work of service. He gave some as apostles, some as prophet, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry to the building up of the body of Christ. It's essentially this, the overview of what he's going to talk about from thereon that the ministry of the word, those gifts that he's given the word to us through are those which equip the saints for the work of ministry. I think we need to change the way we think about our involvement in church and I think this, I'm

sharing this a lot of this from an elder view as well. I want you to see how as leaders we're trying to change our own mindset, okay? And this is the ministry mind shift for today: that we need to think differently about this, but it has a reciprocal value both ways all around here, we need to change our minds, our mindset from enlisting workers to equipping ministers. To move from enlisting workers to equipping ministers. That's not a small difference in concept. It's a huge difference.

Enlisting workers. Now we are called to work and he says that, you're equipped for the work, but it's not just for any work, it's for the work of ministry. The New American Standard translates that work of service, the NIV does as well, but the King James and the ESV both say work of ministry, and I think they get it right here especially as you're trying to apply what Paul's getting at in the present day. I think work of ministry is a better translation. The word is diakonia. The word deacon comes from that. It does mean service. It can mean menial service, waiting on tables, but it's often used in its technical sense, and I think that's the sense here. It's often used in a technical sense for another way of describing the ministry of the gospel. The diakonia of the apostles, actually, in Acts 6, you know when the deacons are chosen to serve tables, diakonos. It's so that the – listen to this – the deacons do the diakonos, the deaconing of serving tables so that the apostles will not neglect the diakonia of the word, so that they can do the ministry of the word, they are going to give this, delegate this ministry to the tables to the deacons. Same word. So you see diakonia doesn't always mean menial service, it means the service to God. And here's what Paul is getting at, that's the word here, the work of ministry, the work of the gospel. You're equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

This is basically saying that every one of you, if you belong to Jesus Christ, you are by definition a minister of the gospel. This is what was recovered in the Reformation. Martin Luther by unleashing the gospel, driving the church back to the word, they began to see, "Wait a minute, every one of us are priests." The doctrine of the priesthood of the believer. This was especially important coming out of Catholicism which taught that to be blessed, to meet with God, you had to go through a human priest. You need the priest to mediate from God to you. That's Roman Catholicism. The priest has to bring the blessing. The priest has to put you in contact with God. When Luther started reading his Bible and he got saved he realized, "Wait a minute, the New Testament doesn't teach that at all." The New Testament teaches the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, that is, that the Christian who believes in Jesus Christ by faith, who repents of his sins and places all of his trust in Jesus, what Christ did through his perfect, sinless life, a record of righteousness we read earlier from 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He who knew no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God to Him," the gospel is that glorious exchange, my sins imputed to Christ, he suffers in my place what I deserve, his righteousness imputed to me, his perfect record is imputed to the believer so that the believer then is treated as if he had lived Jesus' perfect life. That is the gospel. That is the way of salvation. God punishes our sins in Christ on the cross and he through the resurrection vindicates that that sacrifice was accepted and the believer then is treated as if he lived Jesus' perfect life. It's regardless of who we are because we are unworthy.

That's the gospel and what that means is that every person who believes has access directly into the throne of God. This is what Hebrews 4:14 is talking about when it says you're to go boldly, actually verse 16, you go boldly to the throne of grace. Why do you go boldly to the throne of grace? Chapter 4:14 says because we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. Go boldly to the throne of grace. Our high priest has made us and given us access to go into the very holy of Holies and we're to go boldly in his name. We don't need another human who's been designated by the church to usher us in. That's why the Bible calls us a kingdom of priests.

A great picture of this is in 1 Peter 2. Turn over there 1 Peter 2:9 and 10. Peter is writing to believers scattered throughout Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, and just north of there. So these are mostly Gentile Christians. There's Jews in here as well, the church is in this area. But he's telling them, "Listen, your identity is no longer in your ethnicity primarily." I mean, certainly you have ethnic identity. Your identity is no longer in your national identity or your city you live in. Your identity is in who you are in Christ. He says in verse 9 speaking to this group of people scattered across this region, "But you," you plural, "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Your identity has been changed. If you're a Christian, if you have placed your faith in Christ, you have become part of the people of God, everything that Israel was in the Old Testament that anticipated what God was going to do through Christ to make people of every tribe and tongue and kindred one people with one King, Jesus.

And he says four different terms: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession. A people belonging to God. A holy nation, a nation set apart. What's your national identity? You're in the holy nation of God. You belong to God. You're his own possession. You're a chosen race. What is your ethnic identity? You're a Christian. I mean, I'm not saying the other things have its place, but it's far secondary to who you are in Christ. But he says a royal priesthood. You're kingly priests. You are priests. Every Christian is a priest who belongs to the King. You go directly to God. You have access to the Lord. You actually, you and I, now this is what's really cool is the unbeliever doesn't have access to God. When you share the gospel, when you live out the gospel, when you speak the gospel to him, you are mediating the presence of God to this unbeliever. You're a priest. But once you come to faith, you don't need anybody else to usher you into God's presence.

Now, so we're all priests, and we all serve in the temple. We all have work to do. Back over to Ephesians 2:19 to 22. Paul changes metaphors here. He's talking about the same group of people, but he describes us instead of in chapter 4 he says you're a body, you're the body of Christ, now he says you're the household of God, you're the temple of God. Look what he says in verse 19 to the Ephesian Christians, again a mix of Gentile and Jew who now have come to faith in Christ. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens," Ephesians 2:19, "but you are fellow citizens with the saints and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus Himself

being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." He says the church is the temple of God. The body, the local church is God's temple and we are being built into a holy temple, a dwelling place for God. In fact, back in 1 Peter 2, if you read the verses right before the ones we read he says basically the same thing. We're a spiritual temple. It's not the building that matters at the church, it's the people. We are living stones, Peter says in 1 Peter 2:5, living stones being built into a spiritual house.

And he says you're growing into a holy temple in the Lord and then you go over to chapter 4 and he's talking about you're a body, he changes metaphors, now you're a body growing, picture of the body of Christ, but you're growing. In fact, the word growth is so important in that passage. In verse 13, he says you're trying to seek "to be a mature man to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ," so you're growing up, basically. Verse 15, "speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him." Verse 16, "from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."

So you're all, we're all priests, and we're all called to build the temple and to help grow up the body and that is your identity. That is your primary fundamental identity. It's more important than your career. Not to say your career is not important. Of course it is, but it's more important than your career. It is your identity. You are a child of the King. You're a royal priesthood. You're to be building the temple of God and that is to be your life's work and it is the only work that's going to last forever anyway. And we need to see ourselves that way. Said that in the 16th century, after Luther's Reformation started Tyndale, actually late 16th century the church is becoming strong in England. Said there was a billboard. I don't know what billboards looked like in the 16th century. I know they didn't have neon lights though, they flashed. But anyway, so there was a billboard in London. They had a picture of three men, they were tradesmen. Like a, you know, a cobbler, a guy who makes shoes, a blacksmith, a baker. Three men. It wasn't three particular men, it was showing the work that was being done and the caption over the billboard said, "These three men preach the gospel every day in London." Someone had rented that out to say, "This is the truth of who we are in Christ. No matter what you do, your work is to preach the gospel every day, to live for God, to love God, to look for opportunities to share Christ with others, to show them the difference and to be ready to give an answer for the reason for the hope that is within you."

This is our calling and so now, listen, that means that we're called to do that and to do that we have to get built up in here. We come here to build one another up to go out and take the message. We don't have outreach events where we say everybody go invite your unbelieving friends to church. I'm fine with you inviting unbelieving friends to church, but that's not the primary way the gospel goes forth because the purpose of our meeting is to come together as people who love Jesus and are committed to his word, to edify and encourage one another to go out into the mission field. Every Sunday when you leave, you're going out into the mission field. You come in here to get built up and so you must

come in here, according to what we're saying here, you must come every time you come to this place with a mindset to minister. You are a minister. You're not a consumer. You're not here as a person, I mean, if you're trying to decide whether this church is your church and you're visiting, of course you've got to prayerfully decide and seek that out, but once you commit to be here, you don't come as a consumer, "Okay, well, I'm not really that crazy about what we've been doing lately. Sermons have been weak lately. Music's been off a little bit. I'm going to find another church." That is an ungodly mindset. That is not a, the New Testament does not recognize that kind of thinking. How can you leave the temple you're a part of? How can you leave the body that you're a part of? It's not a small thing. You may have to because there's unfaithfulness in some way and you've tried to work it out, but it has to be thought very carefully about.

So we're called to come to work but the work isn't just...the reason I said to move from enlisting workers, to me the word "work," even though it's a good word, it's lifted up by that prepositional phrase "of ministry." You're being equipped for the work of ministry. So we're not just trying to find another person to fill out the nursery role, we're finding a servant of God to minister to our babies. We want every person that's helping set up for the shower today, if we're thinking rightly about it, even though I'm doing some menial tasks this is ministry to other blood-bought believers who are precious to my King, and I get to minister to him by ministering to them. What Jesus says in Matthew 25 so powerfully, we ought to think about it, meditate on it more, "When you do it under one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me." So that's what should motivate our service. "Jesus, I'm blessing You as I do this even unpleasant thing that I would rather not be doing but it's got to be done, and I see it. You made it known to me, it's evident, and I'm going to go at it with all of my heart and I'm going to do it as unto You." When we come together like that, the Spirit is working in our midst and he's shaping us and he's conforming us individually to be more and more like Jesus, and corporately to be more and more like Jesus.

So every ministry in the body is significant. We saw this in 1 Corinthians 12, the things that we see, the gifts that seem to be of less importance, less honor, less presentable, remember that there's three times he says that, several weeks ago I preached on 1 Corinthians 12 that which seems to be less presentable, less honorable, whatever the other less was, is actually in reality more, more valuable, more presentable because God makes his glory known in weakness, and so the lesser things can be the most glorious things therefore whatever I'm doing, I'm going to do it for the glory of God. And when we do stuff like that, it does become that way. It shines out. I mean, when you do whatever you're doing for the glory of God, the Spirit of God and of glory rests on you and people notice it. In fact, the most mundane things are the best way to show that because they don't expect to see any glory. Remember hearing about a Christian street sweeper back in the days we had street sweepers, who was so filled with the joy of the Lord he did what he did unto the Lord that he was an evangelistic dynamo. People wanted to know what his deal was. Why was he so happy? Why was he so excited about doing something that seemed so worthless in the eyes of the world? Because of what Jesus had done for him and God had placed him, "This is my station. This is the place that the King has set me to do His work, to be His ambassador. I'm going to do it to the

utmost of my ability for His glory and look at God work through a heart surrendered to Him like that."

That's what we're all called to do and so this means we're called to get involved, and it means that everybody needs to have a ministry. Now let me say this, our ministries are multifaceted. We're to be ministers wherever we are, in every role that we have. You're a minister in your home. You're a minister in your neighborhood. You're a minister in your family. You're a minister of God's grace to everyone at your workplace, at school. And some of those require different amounts of time. You know, when you're a young mother, you can't have quite as many jobs at church as you might later in life and that's understandable. We understand that. We want to help each other do God's will in all the areas. But I think as Americans there's something we tend to be so privatized and it's about me and it's about my family, that we don't think rightly about the value of the church and we don't make the kind of commitments and sacrifice we need to make for the body.

We haven't reformed our thinking in that area, and if we understand that what's happening here is the most important thing that happens, Dalton said earlier, this is the most wonderful time of the week, it's when the body of Christ gathers, it is and that's certainly how God feels and this is the time where we're all getting prepared to go back out, there's nothing more important than what we do here. We need to come with that kind of mindset. This means where are you serving? Where are you ministering to other members of the body? You need to look for opportunities and opportunities are a lot of times the places that you see where things aren't going the way they need to go. Rather than be a consumer and leave because you don't like this isn't happening or that isn't happening, get involved, offer, volunteer, and be patient because sometimes it takes some time to get things started. It's not going to happen on a dime.

But the Lord wants to build his church. He will build his church. And that what we're supposed to do as leaders is to equip you and this is one of the areas where I think that I was very convicted about in thinking about the way we've led, and particularly me but also the way I've helped the elders to lead. Our equipping has been where it primarily, you equip primarily as you see this you're equipped through the ministry of the word, that's those gifts, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. That's the ministry of the word. The ministry of the word equips the saints. It furnishes everything you need to do the work. And what I was convicted about was we've been committed to expositional preaching to Sunday mornings, Wednesday nights through the years, trying to be somewhat practical more in recent years in the areas of biblical counseling, but I think we need to, I was convicted that I need to spend more time studying in particular areas of ministry of the church. Like, let's take the word of God and apply it to the nursery ministry. What does God's word say about how we make that the very best it can be for the glory of God? How do we do that in the area of youth ministry? And you have to set aside time to study it rather than just take what's given. There's a lot of great stuff out there and part of it is taking that and gleaning from it, but the church needs elders, pastors are called to spend time doing that, and I have to confess, I haven't spent enough time doing that. I've let the ministry of the word in preaching and teaching and counseling

dominate my time to such a point that I haven't spent time on stuff. And one of the things that was really eye-opening for me was when I spent all the time on my project working on persons with disabilities. You start into that and you're like, "Wow, you know, I don't know what's going to happen with this." But what you start seeing is as you just open up the Scriptures and apply them to this issue, here's an area we need to look at, what does the Bible say about it, it is amazing how rich the Scriptures are in every area of need that we have and until you ask the right questions, you don't get the answers.

So anyway, it was transformative for me in looking at that and I think it's going to be for our church in that area, but we need to do this, we want to be more about equipping. We want to be about helping people develop the ministry, but then you doing the ministry, helping equip you to do the ministry. We need some of you to lead our ministry of persons with disabilities. We need some of you to lead other ministries that need to get started. Be patient with us, we're going to help equip you, but if you've got a burden, then share it with me, share it with the elders, and we want to commit to equip you, to encourage you, to support you, to make this a bigger priority in our time than we have. We haven't tried to ignore it. It's obviously once you look at it it's like, what are we doing? Why have we not been doing more of this? It's the tyranny of the urgent. And if you fail to plan you, you fail to plan, you plan to fail. So pray for us in that area but then also pray for your own heart, that you would have a minister's mindset, that you would see the incredible nobility of serving in the body of Christ in whatever way you can. It's a glorious, glorious thing to serve the King by serving his people.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Our Father, we confess, Lord, we have too low a view of so many things that we should have a high view of, most supremely we do have too often a low view of God. We want our thoughts to be more accurate, to see You as You are, high and lofty, exalted above the heavens, matchless in power and glory and beauty. To be in your presence, to taste and to see that the Lord is good, to experience Your love, to see Your glory. There's nothing that compares to that and that will be our delight through all eternity. We pray, Lord, that we would have hearts even now that are not satisfied with anything less than seeing You and loving You and glorifying You. We pray that You'd help us have a higher view of the church, that we would not allow the temptations of Satan and the foolishness of our world system to make us think so little of Your temple, of the very body of Christ, but that we would see the church as You see her, and we would grant honor to one another that is appropriate and commensurate to that, and we would delight in serving one another and blessing one another so that we could actually express our love to our precious Savior. Help us, Lord, as leaders to be more wise in the way we equip and help and train. Help us administer things better, Lord, to manage our resources, our time, the wonderful people that You've placed here, the gifts that You've given, that we might be faithful stewards. We pray that each one who belongs to You would be faithful, more and more faithful servants, so they would hear those wonderful words, "You've been faithful." Father, be glorified in Your church, make us what You want us to be individually and corporately. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*