



INSIDE CHURCH

**A SMALL GROUP STUDY
FOR THE PEOPLE OF
HARVEST FRESNO**

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By the elders of Harvest Fresno

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Introduction

WE ARE EXCITED to roll out this small group study to the church. The study was born out of the elders reviewing the church's bylaws, which is a document relating to the governance and administration of the church. This may sound boring to you, but the document contains what we believe and the distinctive practices of the church. As we were going through the document, issues ranging from the church's position on human sexuality to church discipline arose. As the subjects came up, we would say to each other that it would be helpful for the entire church to be taught on this subject, which brings us to this study. Instead of teaching about our beliefs and practices in an isolated fashion, we thought it would make a great small group study!

It is our heart's desire that as you go through the material, you will see the authority of God's word shine through the beliefs and practices of our church. We also pray that you would be enlightened and have a greater understanding of God and how he wants his church to function. Lastly and most importantly, God the Father loves the church and sent his Son to die and redeem her to take as the bride for his Son. The church is precious to God and our greatest desire from this study is that

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the church would become more precious to you and that your love for the Lord increases ever more.

You are loved,
Pastor Ben

LESSON 1

A Gospel Church

There is nothing else like the church in the world today—a new kind of community created by God that makes the gospel visible and convincing in a world that believes everything but the gospel.

—Ray Ortland

WHEN NEW VISITORS JOIN US FOR DISCOVER HARVEST, we ask Pastor Ben to talk about what kind of church we are. Maybe you came to Harvest Fresno looking for a Bible church, where the Bible is held up with careful study and with close adherence to historic orthodox doctrine. We do that. Or maybe you came looking for a church where relationships mean more than mere “fellowship,” but instead reach to a level of ministering to one another in love. We hope we do that, too. But if you want to know who we are in a word, Pastor Ben tells visitors that we are a gospel church.

In the same way, we have heard from our members and regular attenders that one thing they love about Harvest is that the gospel is preached every week. Apparently that is a good thing! But it is only a good thing if people know what the gospel is. So let’s begin with a question. In your own words, what is the gospel?

Did we give you enough space to answer the question? Your answer might depend on how long you have been a believer and follower of Jesus. Or how much of the Bible you have read. Or whether you've added to your knowledge through reading, or listening to sermons on the radio or online. But here is what we have come to recognize. If you believe on the basis of the gospel, you should be able to articulate it—albeit somewhat basically—from the day you say yes to Jesus. And if you keep looking for the gospel as you study Scripture, hear gospel-centered preaching, and join others in discussion about the gospel, then your understanding of the gospel should continue to grow and grow.

The gospel as doctrine

You have almost certainly heard the gospel defined in this simple way: the good news. If this is true, then the gospel should be easier to find when we open our Bibles. But when we tell the whole gospel story, some parts of it are quite bad. For one, our sin is bad. It is our sin that separates us from God, both now and for eternity if we never turn to him. Unless we recognize and confess to our sin, as ugly as it may appear and as humbling as the admission of sin can be, we will never be interested in good news. We will go on blindly thinking that the life we have is good enough. So we start with the bad news that our sin has cut us off from the holiness of God.

From here, though, we can find a remedy for our sin. Not a little painkiller or a pick-me-up like 5-Hour Energy, but a real cure that comes from God. That cure took the form of the man Jesus of Nazareth, born of the Holy Spirit to the Virgin Mary. As the incarnation

(flesh-and-bones) of God on earth, Jesus came for a single purpose: to pay the price of justice for the sake of our lost souls.

What's this about a price? In the Old Testament, God laid down the standard for sin's atonement: the blood of spotless lambs. Sadly, these lambs, though unblemished, were without a conscience and could not in one lasting sacrifice atone for all humanity. This is why Jesus came. As the sinless one, his death on the cross, where his blood was shed to cleanse our sins, forged the only way for us to be restored to God—not by our righteous acts or attempts at devout religion or sincerity of heart—but by the righteousness of Christ alone.

The work of Christ that makes us right before God carries a significant theological term: justification. Under this principle, we are made legally right before God. Again, we make a profound mistake if we think we can do this on our own. Instead, justification comes to us through Christ in two ways. First, we are forgiven. Our sins are thrown “as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12). Second, we receive imputed righteousness. This means that Jesus' righteousness is accounted to us. We read this amazing truth in Romans 5:19:

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

The first man is Adam, whose sin we all share and cannot escape on our own. The second man is Jesus, and by him we are made righteous.

This is not just good news; this is the best news ever known. Jesus' death has covered our sin and his resurrection has triumphed over the death that would consume us. By his cleansing sacrifice, he is Savior. By his resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father, he is established as Lord. What a wonder he is!

But this news leads to a question we all must answer. It is not enough to know the gospel. We must know Jesus. We must see him as he is: Savior and Lord, and we must respond to who he is with faith if we are to be saved. The gift of salvation is offered to us freely,

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but there are many who don't want the gift. They are pleased to rule their own lives. Either they think they can show God that they have the "spiritual chops" to get into heaven on their own, or they aren't interested in eternity with God, or they have by their intellect ruled out the possibility of any of this being true. The Scriptures tell us that these people will die in their sins. But again there is good news. The wonders of abundant life with Christ and eternal life with him too are available to us when we come in faith to the foot of the cross, and say to Jesus, "Your grace is irresistible to me. I am a great sinner, but you are a greater Savior. Please take my life and make me new." To the man or woman who says this to God, the promise is clear, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

The gospel in practice

As wonderful as the gospel is, it is not something we want to spout only as doctrine. This is not enough for us as a church of believers encouraging one another in the faith, and it is certainly not enough when we reach out to those who do not yet believe. Why not? Because we can talk all we want of grace, but if we do not demonstrate it among ourselves and offer it authentically to others, the thinness of our expressed doctrine will show itself in no time.

Because we have been saved by grace, the salvation message we preach among ourselves and share with others should come with a demonstration of that grace. First, this means that we approach people humbly, remembering the life of sin from which we ourselves have been saved. Second, it means that while we point out the sinfulness that resides in us, we do not hold others' sins against them or portray a holier-than-thou attitude. We must offer to others the forgiveness that has been given to us, for as we read in Colossians 3:13, "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." Third, it means that we hold up the wonder of Christ, in his kindness and mercy, remembering that it is God's kindness that leads people to repentance (Romans 2:4). Fourth, it means that we continue to encourage one another to reach out for that forgiveness, because God is faithful and just to forgive our sins (1 John 1:9), even after we are saved and should know better. And finally, it means that

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we will help to restore one another when our sins have led not only to earthly consequences but have caused a rift between us and God.

This sort of gospel-giving approach to life is something the world does not know innately; they must see it in action. We as the church of Jesus Christ are the people among whom they must see it. We don't lightly dismiss sin, sweeping it aside so we can sleep better at night. We bring the message of lasting forgiveness that comes in Christ. And when we bring it with the grace of good listening and patient understanding and hope-filled vision to go with our well-stated doctrine, then we are positioned to be messengers of the gospel both in voice and in action. What a church we would be if we committed to doing this together and challenged one another regularly to live out the words we preach!

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Acts 2:22-41.

What aspects of the gospel outlined in this chapter do you find in this passage?

Read John 1:14-15, Acts 3:17-20, and Acts 26:19-20.

These are only a few examples of the call to repentance in Scripture. If to repent literally means "to turn around," why is this such a critical aspect of giving one's life to Christ?

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What kinds of deeds would show that one's life is "in keeping with repentance"?

Read Romans 1:16-17.

What short line did Paul use here to describe the gospel?

How are faith and righteousness linked?

Read Galatians 1:6-7.

What are some ways that the gospel can be distorted? How can we help one another guard against a different gospel creeping in to our thoughts and faith?

Personal application

What about the gospel resonates most meaningfully with you?

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Have you repented and given your life to Jesus? If not, what is holding you back? If so, what joys have come to you as you have submitted your life to Christ?

What or who attempts to undermine the gospel as you know it? How does living in community with other believers at a church like Harvest Fresno help you stand firm in the grace and righteousness of Christ, rather than trying to fall back on your own strength?

Theology really only holds value when it comes to bear on our lives. How can the second aspect of justification—Christ's righteousness imputed (attributed) to you—impact the way you live each day? In what ways is living righteously with Christ in you a pleasure? In what ways does it bring responsibility?

LESSON 2

Pillar 1: Unashamed Adoration **Lifting High the Name of Jesus in Worship**

So often when my worship has dried up, it's because I haven't been fueling the fire. I haven't set aside any time to soak myself under the showers of God's revelation. Often, time is the key factor. But if we can find space to soak ourselves in God's word, his presence, his creation and spend time with other believers, then we'll find that the revelation floods back into our lives; and our hearts will respond with a blaze of worship once more. – Matt Redman

HOW MANY TIMES have you read an account in Scripture and come away saying to yourself, “Wow, I’m glad that wasn’t me!”? Think of Abraham with the knife raised over his son Isaac or Daniel sentenced to the lions or Peter languishing in a jail cell on the eve of what might be his death. In cases like these, we recognize the nearness of persecution and death and are glad we have never had to face the same. A woman with children might read the pain of one of Scripture’s barren women and thank God she did not have to endure something similar.

We are all glad to avoid such obviously difficult circumstances. But here is a more humorous example, and yet it is another where you may have breathed a sigh of relief not to have had to live it out: David dancing in the streets, worshiping the Lord before the crowds

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in nothing but his skivvies! If you're not familiar with this story, you will find it in 2 Samuel 6. David as king had arranged for the ark of the covenant to be returned to Jerusalem. As it entered the city, "David danced before the LORD with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the horn." This was an act of unashamed worship.

But not for everyone. David's wife Michal was watching from her window, and we are told that when she saw David behaving in such a manner, "she despised him in her heart." Herein lies our own possible reaction to what we read of David: embarrassment. We are glad that we have never worshiped God in such a strange and public way.

Amazingly, when Michal expressed her disdain to David, he said in essence that this was only the beginning: "It was before the LORD... I will celebrate before the LORD. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes."

What is your own view of worship? Does David's perspective completely unnerve you, or do you wish you could be as bold as this?

What is worship?

True worship brings together the heart's affections and the Lord of our lives. Many worshipers around the world are emotive and sincere, but they are worshiping false gods who cannot save. Others may have their eyes set toward Christ, but their expressions of love and praise to him dried out long ago or are limited in scope. Here is a far-reaching definition of worship: "Worship is devotion and adoration directed toward God; it is the giving of your heart, mind, soul, and body to God." Here we see a full commitment of expression to God, our Creator and Redeemer. No part of us is left out of telling him we love him.

The expressions of worship we find in Scripture are several, including psalms and doxologies, prayers and prostrations, shouts to the Lord and the clapping of hands. In the church today, when the preacher preaches with care and honor to God, this is an act of wor-

ship—just as it is an act of worship when we attend to that preaching with focus and a desire to know and serve God all the more because of what is being taught. And we might go on to recognize that the same is true for the set-up team or the nursery workers or the parking lot attendants when they “sing and make music in their heart to the Lord” as they serve the church on a Sunday morning.

Worship goes home with us, too. You may have a regular appointment with the Lord each day, where you take time to express your love for and appreciation to the Lord in worship. You may do this in solitude or share the time with your family. This through-the-week worship is unexchangeably valuable to your soul.

In this chapter, we are focusing on the church. And while worship in the church service includes prayer, Scripture reading, music, preaching, giving, and the ordinances (baptism and communion), we will limit our considerations to the corporate, musical worship of the church. What are we endeavoring to do when we sing together, and are we really trying to reach the level of public adoration that David did?

Time for worship

If we were to define worship in a way that captured all our expressions of worship, we might choose two memorably rhyming words: gazing and praising. That is, we must see God before we can lift him up with earnest exaltation. This does not happen by accident.

Consider a typical Sunday morning. You have arisen with perfect intent to arrive at church on time with your heart ready for worship. Then comes the child with the runny nose and the toast that falls butter-side down on the kitchen floor and the car that needs gas. Or maybe all goes well at home, but when you get out of your car in the parking lot, you are met by a dear friend whose personal needs cut deeply that morning. By Satan or by circumstance, your chance at starting worship in focus is quickly disappearing.

And that is the problem: when 10 o'clock rolls around at Harvest, worship starts. The music begins and you're supposed to be praising when you've had no chance for gazing. You know the words are flat and your heart is unmoved. You may be worshiping God in truth,

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but you're not worshipping him in spirit. Getting out of this funk is going to take some time.

Two aspects of the way we structure worship at Harvest Fresno are meant to help you see God well and worship him more as the distractions fall away.

Contemporary music. The first commitment we have made is to contemporary worship. There are still churches dedicated to singing only from the psalter or singing only older traditional hymns. Certainly you will find excellent phrasing and good theology in many of those songs—if you can understand them. Very few of us talk with our friends in the wording we find in old songs. We would sound like characters in a Shakespeare play! This may be OK when you have time to think through the words, but when you're singing, the words move quickly. You want to be able to sing, understand, appreciate, and express them all at the same time. Singing words that are timeless in their meaning but contemporary in the way they are written and the music to which they are set helps us engage in recognizing God's excellence in the words of the song and exalting him for that excellence. The Bible's original language and many of its translations were written with the everyday conversation of the people in mind. We think this plan works for worship songs, too.

Progressive praise. The second way we look to see God well in worship is by building a music set that progresses from where we come to where we want to go. The destination of our worship is a full focus on God. To get there, we typically begin with a song that is a call to worship. It does not emphasize our needs or God's greatness so much as our purpose in gathering before him. This song gives your mind and heart a chance to shake off the things you have carried in the door with you and reset your attention to the hour at hand.

We then begin to sing songs that recognize our needs before God. Sometimes you will hear criticism that songs sung in a given church focus on "me" or "I" rather than on God. But when we consider the psalms, large numbers of them place the writer's circumstances openly before the Lord: "Here is where I am right now, God. How will you respond to me?" So we sing songs that honestly

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admit our sinfulness, our hurts, and our needs. When we confess how needy we are, we are more ready to place ourselves under the care of the one source of strength who can manage it all: Jesus.

Finally, we reach our worship destination. We come to a place of full praise. God is exalted for who he is and what he alone can do. This song may be the one we close with after the sermon, when we have had a full morning of gazing on the Lord.

But don't lose sight of a very important principle. It is worship that prepares us for the sermon, not the other way around. Too many people float into the service late, saying to themselves, "Oh, that's just the music. I'm here for the meat." But focused worship spread over four or five songs allows us to set aside the disturbances of the week and the morning and attend not only to the words in the music but also to the words on the page when we open our Bibles together and find what the Holy Spirit has for us there.

Physical expressions of worship

Before we end our discussion here, we want to take a few moments to consider how you might express yourself in worship. Here again, tradition can take over and cause us to consider one action or another to be "right" or "wrong." What if the person next to you raises her hands in worship or gets down on his knees? Does this make you uncomfortable? What if the people clapped their hands in a sort of ovation after the song ended? If you did not grow up in a church with such traditions, you might wonder if this is acceptable. And if you're relatively new to church, you likely have questions, too.

A number of Scripture passages affirm that any of the expressions above are fine with God. The Hebrew word for worship can literally mean to kneel or prostrate one's self. So going back into the Old Testament gives us the oldest guideline we can find—and it tells us we don't have to stand like a statue or sit stoically in worship. As you read, you will also find where we are told to clap our hands, raise our hands, shout to the Lord, and otherwise lift up our praises to him in physical and maybe even noisy fashion. We cannot fear lively expressions of worship—and we probably should be doing all we can to welcome them!

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This does not mean all fences come down. The principles of corporate worship we find in 1 Corinthians 14 remind us that we need to be orderly and honor one another when we worship. Our expressions should be free, but our freedom should not extend to distracting others. We can't always know how our own worship is affecting those around us, and our first priority should be unashamed adoration to the Lord, but when we can defer to our neighbor in love and encouragement, then we should be looking to do that, too.

Exploring the Scriptures

Read John 4:19-23.

What do you think it means to worship God in spirit and in truth?

How can we set “religion” aside for the sake of authentic expression?

Read Psalm 63:4, 95:1-6, 100:1-2, 134:2, 150:1-6, and Ephesians 5:18-20.

What expressions of worship do you find in these passages?

Which of these are more or less comfortable for you? Why do you think that is? Generally, would you say you need to be more or less expressive in your worship?

Personal application

How does the idea of gazing and praising remind you of the purpose and value of worship?

How can you do a better job of preparing to worship with the congregation on Sunday mornings?

To what extent does your private or family worship contribute to the corporate worship?

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In what ways does corporate singing bring you encouragement?
How does it allow you to encourage others?

LESSON 3

Pillar 2: Unapologetic Preaching Proclaiming the Authority of God's Word

If God is not supreme in our preaching, where in this world will the people hear about the supremacy of God? If we do not spread a banquet of God's beauty on Sunday morning, will not our people seek in vain to satisfy their inconsolable longing with the cotton candy pleasures of pastimes and religious hype? If the fountain of living water does not flow from the mountain of God's sovereign grace on Sunday morning, will not the people hew for themselves cisterns on Monday, broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:13)? – John Piper

IS CHURCH A SPECTATOR SPORT? When the preacher takes to the pulpit, a lot of people think so. Here is a man of God doing his work, explaining the truths of Scripture. But for the rest of us, it looks like a passive time, sitting back in our chairs and listening.

If you look around, however, you will see that this is not true for everyone. Some in the congregation will have their Bibles open, following along with the passages being taught. Others will use the notetaking sheet or their own notebook to record the main points and other important notes from the teaching. These people are engaged. They recognize that the Scripture is not being taught only for them to fill their heads with a few extra Bible facts. Instead they are hoping to find out what God has to say to them through his inspired

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word and apply it to their lives where they live and work and play.

The second pillar of Harvest Fresno emphasizes the unapologetic preaching of Scripture, but it does not assume that this is the conscious effort of only the one doing the preaching. We all want to come to a Sunday service ready to listen, learn, and take away the will of God for us.

The authority of God's word

You may notice a nuance in the way this pillar is written. Not only do we proclaim Scripture itself, preaching the words of God for all people in all times. We also proclaim something very basic about the Scripture: it is authoritative.

By definition, when someone or something is authoritative, it has a governing role in our lives. In truth, we are all our own authority, telling ourselves what to do in the way we want to do it. Unless, that is, we surrender to a greater authority. When we come to the Scriptures and submit to their instruction and directives, we are submitting not only to the words on the page but to the author of those words.

In the apostle Paul's second letter to his protégé, Timothy, he expressed the truth that "all Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Timothy 3:16). This is not the kind of inspiration we allude to when we refer to a great poet or musician. In those cases, the work of the artist may come with unusual beauty or insight. But in the case of Scripture, the very words come from God; most literally, the inspired words of God are expired. It is not the author who is "inspired" but the words themselves. We can trust that each word of Scripture comes from the Lord. No words God has given us are accidental or subjected to the feelings or skill of those who put them to paper. Theologically, this is called inerrancy, where we believe that in the original manuscripts, every word has come to us without error.

When we receive the words of God in this way, as absolutely authoritative, we actually find that direction for our lives is much clearer. We're not required to select or guess at which passages of the Bible are from the Lord. They all are! Instead of giving the interpre-

tation of Scripture our best shot, we can take what God has given us and run with it in complete confidence.

The saving power of God's word

Many excellent pieces of literature can take us to a place of seeing our world in helpful ways. They can help us understand people who live in a way we do not, or figure out how to solve problems from a fresh point of view, or let us capture a glimpse of geography or history that we might not otherwise experience. For these reasons, we might be encouraged to read. But Scripture reaches beyond even these meaningful interactions—far beyond them. This is because only Scripture delivers the power to save.

How can a few words on a page hold such promise? Well, as we have already noted, these are not random words or the words of a particularly wise writer. They are God's words and they contain the gospel, which we learned in Chapter 1 is the message of how God through his Son forgives our sin and breathes new and everlasting life into us. No other message (and no other book) offers such reality.

In the same passage we considered earlier, Paul told Timothy that “the sacred writings...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). To the Romans, Paul similarly wrote that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). These are unique promises causing us to be reminded that the gospel laid out in the Scriptures offers us something that nothing else can. And we're not talking only about reading. This is where the verbal preaching of God's word also carries great significance. When a teacher committed to the careful teaching of the word opens the Bible and helps others understand the truth within, the opportunity for salvation can seize the heart of the hearer.

The sanctifying power of God's word

Sanctification looks like a daunting theological word, but it is really quite simple to understand. When the Holy Spirit is sanctifying you, he is developing you into the likeness of Christ. This is a work that begins when you surrender authority over your life to Jesus,

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and it continues for the whole of your life. We grow till we go!

The words of Scripture are given for the equipping of the saints—that is, for the development of everyone who has put their faith in Jesus. To others, it may be a book of good morals. In fact, some will wrongly follow the commandments of Scripture as a way to get to heaven in their own righteousness. Disciples of Jesus certainly want to pursue righteousness, but this is not something we do to accumulate points with God. Instead, it is how we express our love and commitment to him. Wonderfully, the Bible sets us up for this very thing.

Paul told Timothy that the God-breathed Scriptures are “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training.” Let’s consider those four key words for a moment. According to one theologian, look at what each does for us:

- Teaching keeps us from error
- Reproof keeps us from sin
- Correction keeps us from failure
- Training keeps us from foolishness

No one would choose to fall into error, sin, failure, or foolishness (though we often do). But if we will take the time to read the Scriptures and hear them taught, and if we consider how we can serve the Lord through the application of these words to our lives, we can avoid the miseries of unwise living.

The preaching of God’s word

We have given significant attention to the nature and purpose of God’s word. Before we close this chapter, let’s circle back to emphasize the preaching of Scripture. In the opening verses of 2 Timothy 4, Paul gave Timothy a plain objective: “Preach the word.” In the Greek, the word for preach means to herald, or announce. In the sense of kingdom dynamics, a ruler enlists a herald to make known his or her decrees throughout the kingdom. This is not the work of a creative mind; the herald’s job is to dispense the decrees exactly as they are given.

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For this reason, at Harvest Fresno we employ expository teaching. This form of teaching honors the intended meaning of the passage. Rather than first choosing a theme and finding passages that may support the thesis of the preacher, expository teaching begins with the passage and exposes what is there. To accomplish this, our teachers rely on the meanings of the words in original languages (Hebrew and Greek), as well as the commentaries of orthodox teachers, whether they are older theologians, such as the Puritans, or contemporary pastors and theologians who honor the Scriptures. More than these sources, however, preachers convey the word of God rightly when they depend on the Holy Spirit's illumination of the word. This does not mean the preacher is looking for something novel or surprising from the text (though they may find this). Rather, they want the Holy Spirit to unveil the proper emphasis of the passage for the congregation. Alister Begg commends pastors to a four-part preparation pattern for preaching: think yourself empty, read yourself full, write yourself clear, and pray yourself hot. That prayer, in that it allows the preacher to deliver the sermon with precise application, should never be overlooked. And when we say this, we would add that not only should the preacher be praying for the power of the message, but the congregation should be as well. We can pray for the work and words of the preacher, and we can ask God directly, "Lord Jesus, please speak to me."

Exploring the Scriptures

Read 2 Timothy 4:1-4.

What work did Paul call Timothy to perform? How often did Paul tell him he needed to be ready? What do you think this kind of readiness includes?

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According to this passage, what error does good teaching and study of the word protect us from?

Read Hebrews 4:12-13.

What powerful picture is given to us here to help us see the strength of Scripture?

What is God's target for the Scripture he has given us?

Read Psalm 19:7-11.

What adjectives are used here to describe God's instruction for us in his word? What does Scripture provide for us that other sources of knowledge or wisdom cannot?

Personal application

How much time do you spend studying and learning from the

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Scriptures? How do you guard against gathering only knowledge and instead commit to learning the word for the purpose of application?

What do you appreciate about the careful teaching of the Scriptures? How can you support the pastor and elders in their preaching of the word?

Describe a time when the word of God exposed your heart and caused you to respond with increased faith and commitment to the ways of the Lord.

How will you come to church prepared differently on a Sunday morning because of what you have read in this chapter? What is your role in encouraging others, including your spouse and children, to do the same?

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LESSON 4

Pillar 3: Unceasing Prayer

Believing Firmly in the Power of Prayer

Prayer is asking God to incarnate, to get dirty in your life. Yes, the eternal God scrubs floors. For sure we know he washes feet. So take Jesus at his word. Ask him. Tell him what you want. Get dirty. Write out your prayer requests; don't mindlessly drift through life on the American narcotic of busyness. If you try to seize the day, the day will eventually break you. Seize the corner of his garment and don't let go until he blesses you. He will reshape the day. – Paul Miller

AT THE OUTSET OF LUKE 18, we are led by Jesus to the court of a judge in an ancient city. The Lord was telling his listeners the Parable of the Persistent Widow, who repeatedly comes to the judge asking for justice in the case of her adversary. The judge eventually gives the woman what she wants because he grows tired of her relentless method.

While he might have chosen other analogies for this parable, Jesus connected it specifically to prayer. So did Luke, under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, when he prefaced this parable with these words: "He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."

Always praying, not losing heart. If we were to choose a particular pattern for prayer in the life of the believer and the life of the

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church, this would be it. It is easy, as we will investigate shortly, to lose heart in prayer. It is easy to turn our attentions elsewhere and forget the value of prayer in our relationship with the Lord. By prayer, we tell God our needs and thank him for his answers (Philippians 4:6)—but only when we keep up the business of prayer.

Prayer and the one who hears our prayers

In its fullness, the third pillar of Harvest Fresno, says, “Believing firmly in the power of prayer.” This may produce an immediate question in your mind: Is it the power of prayer or the power of God we really believe in? The answer, you might already be guessing, is both.

Without God, prayer is meaningless. In fact, it is common in our time for two things to happen when a tragedy occurs. First, many sympathetic people post these words to their social media account: “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” Next, many who think this is only meaningless sentiment shoot down such well wishes. The latter generally do so because they do not believe in God. And if they do not believe in God, it is easy to understand that they would not believe in prayer. It would be like the widow in Jesus’ parable pleading for justice from the local farmer rather than the judge. So the power of prayer rests entirely on the position and power of God. He is there and he answers, “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20).

God’s role as the one who responds to our prayers does not, however, diminish the purpose and power of prayer. Vehicles cannot go anywhere without a power source, whether gasoline or electricity. But neither can they go without a driver pushing the accelerator. When we pray, we push the accelerator and access the power that makes life go. This isn’t just a nifty illustration; this is the way of the Lord Jesus.

Paul wrote of the relationship between Jesus and his church. He is the head, and we are the body. Because this is true, we look to our head, Jesus, to see how he lived his life. When we do this, we cannot miss that Jesus himself spent regular time in prayer. Early in the morning, well into the night, before meals, at the synagogue—in all

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these contexts, Jesus spoke to the Father. Though the incarnate Lord (God in the flesh), Jesus never dismissed the purpose and power of prayer. If prayer is the way of the Savior, then it should be the way of the saved.

For this reason, we should not be surprised to find many examples of and exhortations to pray in Scripture:

Give ear to my words, O LORD;
consider my groaning.
Give attention to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you do I pray. (Psalm 5:1-2)

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. (Daniel 6:10)

“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26:41)

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him... (Colossians 2:9-10)

When we encounter passages like these, we should be moved not only to appreciate prayer but to pray. But you have probably noticed in your own efforts to pray that many things can conspire against you. This is true not only for each of us in our own prayer life, but we can be hindered as a body of believers, too. To resist this, let's bring these obstacles into the light and encourage one another to keep up the habit of prayer.

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Hindrances to prayer

Every believer will encounter enemies to the faith. Jesus was so sure of this that he told his disciples to pray for these enemies. But above (or behind) all these is our great enemy, Satan. And when it comes to affecting the lives of believers, Satan's warfare is intent on weakening our faith and the demonstrations of it. This may be most true with prayer, for if Satan can distract us from prayer, we find ourselves weakly connected in our relationship with God. When this happens, we do not hear the Lord well and do not trust the Lord fully. So let's learn to keep our eyes open to the way the enemy tries to undermine our prayer life.

1. *Doubt (or a lack of faith)*. Consider James' words in the opening verses of his letter:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5-8)

While the specific context here is a prayer for wisdom, notice that James wrote that a person who doubts "must not suppose he will receive anything from the Lord." When doubt creeps in and threatens our prayers, we may pray, as one man who came to Jesus did, "Help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

2. *Self-sufficiency*. Often we do not engage in prayer because we think we can find the help we need through our own efforts or the efforts and expertise of others. The prophet Jeremiah spoke from the Lord when he warned against such a perspective:

Thus says the LORD:

"Cursed is the man who trusts in man

and makes flesh his strength,
whose heart turns away from the LORD. (Jeremiah 17:5)

Be careful about looking for answers when praying for answers. Be careful you are not exchanging the work only God can do for the visible work of men.

3. *Idolatry*. In the Ten Commandments, God said that we are not to give our worship to any other. He alone is worthy of our praise and our prayers. However, we can fall into placing our trust in systems and projects and people that have no ability to respond. God asked Ezekiel a penetrating question: “Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them?” (Ezekiel 14:3). God suggests that he will not even allow our prayers to reach him if we have established idols that capture our hearts ahead of him.

4. *Sin*. Notice that God’s words to Ezekiel also spoke of putting iniquity before our faces. That is, we let sin fill our eyes. When we knowingly do things that God does not want us to do, or we resist the commands that he calls us to obey, we jeopardize our prayers. One psalmist explained: “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the LORD would not have listened” (Psalm 66:18). Sin is a roadblock to God’s hearing our prayers.

5. *Conflict with others*. In both Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5, as well as in James 4, we read that rifts with other believers can undermine our prayers. We are to settle differences others have with us before we come to the altar, and we must understand that our covetous desires keep us from even asking as we should, for we are bent on seizing things from others for ourselves.

In addition to these listed hindrances, we have already alluded to others. Like the widow, we should be persistent, not giving up easily

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in our prayers. We should demonstrate the urgency of our prayers through the fervency we bring to our time of prayer. And we must be on the lookout for the spiritual warfare the enemy uses to diminish our prayers. In completing his discussion with the Ephesians about employing the full armor of God against the schemes of the devil, Paul wrote that we should be “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication” (Ephesians 6:18).

Prayer is never a casual enterprise. It is the intentional, ongoing work of every believer. And when individual believers in a worshiping congregation commit to this work with dedication and focus, the net effect is that the corporate work of the church in prayer is heightened by way of unity and shared faith. Now let’s go on to consider this corporate work.

Praying together

Jesus said this about the temple of God, echoing the prophet Isaiah: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Mark 11:17). While the temple in Jerusalem was later destroyed and has never been rebuilt, we recognize that when we meet together as God’s people, the purpose of our work must continue to include prayer. This is true on Sunday mornings, during small group meetings, at men’s and women’s retreats, and any other time we come together. To pray together is to defer to the Lord, who is in our midst, and ask him to guide all that we do in one another’s company, whether it be worship or teaching or fellowship or service. In this way, all meetings of the church are prayer meetings, though we do set aside particular times for prayer alone.

One tradition of Harvest Fresno is that we begin each year with a concert of prayer. This is a special Sunday service where we limit the teaching for the sake of additional corporate prayer. Together we confess our sins, seek the Lord’s leading, and ask for the hand of God to do great things in the year to come. We also take time to circle up in small groups of three and four and pray together for personal needs. Sometimes we engage in this last practice during other services throughout the year, as they fit the direction of the morning.

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At the end of each service, we also provide opportunity to come forward and receive personal prayer from our prayer team. This group of people stays as long as necessary to talk and pray with those who bring needs for prayer. We cannot say that the prayers of these people will be heard any better than your own prayers, but the work of intercession (praying for others) can help strengthen your own faith in prayer, especially when circumstances or doubts have weakened your spirit.

In our small groups, especially during the time of mutual ministry, men meet with men and women with women to pray for one another according to our personal situations and needs. This may include confession of sin, which allows for us to pray for one another at our points of weakness for the sake of our walk with Jesus. We know that the early church committed themselves to prayer, meeting in homes and other places and coming to the Lord together. We look to do the same.

Weekly, we supply a list of prayer needs as they are written out in our friendship registers. This list is distributed by email, and we hope that it leads to further prayer for the individuals who list their requests. In addition to prayers for health needs, work situations, or household demands, you will find that many requests are made for the salvation of those who do not yet believe. When we take up these prayers, we have the opportunity to participate in the unmatched work of God as he draws unbelievers to him in faith for eternal life.

Finally, you should know that it is a work of the elders of Harvest Fresno to pray for private needs expressed by our people in their prayer requests, in addition to praying for the general concerns of the church. You may add to your own prayers a regular prayer for the elders in this work, for if you are challenged in your own time of prayer to stay committed and focused, you can be sure these leaders face spiritual opposition to their own discipline of prayer.

Exploring the Scriptures

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

What several functions was the Thessalonian church called to here?

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These directions, including praying without ceasing, are written in the plural. How is your own prayer life encouraged when the church prays together and you participate in those prayers?

Read Acts 2:42.

We find prayer in this list of the activities of the early church. What do you think it means that they devoted themselves to prayer?

How might the people of Harvest Fresno improve our corporate prayer life? What effects do you think this would have on the life of the church?

Personal application

Describe your present prayer life. How frequently and how long do

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you pray? What is the most common content of your prayers? What gets in the way of your prayers? What's the first thing you would do to strengthen your prayer life at this time?

How willing are you to have others pray for you? Do you ask for this assistance only occasionally, do you invite it whenever it is available, or somewhere in between? What causes you to hesitate in asking others to pray for you?

Do you spend time praying for others? What answers have you been blessed to see God give in response to these interceding prayers?

If you were asked to join the prayer team that prays for others on Sunday morning, could you say yes? Why or why not?

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LESSON 5

Pillar 4: Unafraid Witness

Sharing the Good News of Jesus with Boldness

How many Christians fear to speak for Jesus because they think they need eloquence when plainness of speech is all God needs: “God loves you. Jesus Christ died for you. He can change your life. He did it for me. He will do it for you.” That’s the garden-variety, plain-old, blue-jean boldness God blesses. – James MacDonald

THERE IS A SIGN PERHAPS YOU HAVE SEEN. Not big, but big enough. It’s right there after you leave church on Sunday morning and you’re almost to the parking lot. It says: *You are now entering the mission field.* Take a minute to write down what that statement means to you.

Do your thoughts include any personal responsibility? Or is the mission field something “out there” where missionaries do their thing? And if so, what is their thing? And what are the chances God might call you to make their thing your thing?

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While that last question might elicit a “Yikes!” from some people, this is likely because decades (and maybe centuries) of church tradition have put missionaries over there, while the rest of us get to stay right here. But whereas missionaries, especially foreign missionaries, are over there, witnesses are everywhere. And even the newest of all Christians are called to be witnesses. As disciples, we are to work for Christ by telling others who need to hear the good news of Jesus, whether we are introverts or extroverts, conversationalists or wallflowers, public speakers or notewriters.

The apostle Paul wrote these words to the Romans:

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Romans 10:13-15)

This passage ends with two statements we might dare to call thrilling. First, the eternal kingdom of God is open to all who call on the name of the Lord. This is not a closed-door micro-religion we’re dealing with. The invitation is as big as God himself. And we should be thrilled with the angels when even one person calls on Jesus and is saved (Luke 15:10). Then, at the end of the discussion of who carries this message aloud and abroad, we come to the statement that those carriers have beautiful feet. This is the Holy Spirit’s way of telling us we want this job. We want to preach the good news. And as we already learned when studying the second pillar, Unapologetic Preaching, the word *preach* means to herald, to carry the message of the king. This is not a task that requires special training other than this: knowledge of the message of Jesus.

This chapter begins with a quote from James MacDonald that may surprise you. It’s a reminder that the message of Jesus is sim-

ple and personal. Has Jesus taken hold of your heart? Then your preaching follows. As a saved worshiper of the one who saved you, you take that experience (with words attached) to any who will listen. You say to them, “Let me tell you what Jesus did for me. Honestly, it’s amazing.”

The role of boldness

Are you still unconvinced? After all, you are only little old you. Missionary? Evangelist? Witness? Ambassador? Scripture uses all of these labels to identify those who carry Jesus’ message. But you don’t know that any of these fits you. And even if they do, you’re not sure you want this job. Your response is like that of Moses standing before the burning bush: “Can’t you send someone else, Lord? You know, someone who will do a much better job than a man weak of speech can?”

Another reason you may hesitate is because you have heard reference to the word *boldness* when it comes to sharing the gospel. The apostles were certainly bold when they stood up repeatedly in public, though they were confronted and threatened and jailed by local leaders. Is that what I am supposed to do? Paul asked the Ephesians, “[Pray] for me...that I may declare [the gospel] boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:19-20). Should this also be our prayer?

Let’s begin here. You are a believer, a follower of Christ, and no matter your personality or your audience, the Holy Spirit is living inside you. So consider Jesus’ words: “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:11-12). Certainly, as you grow in the knowledge of God through the study of the Scriptures, you may find that you have more biblical resources at your disposal, but what Jesus was saying is that the Holy Spirit will be sufficient even before the toughest crowd. What this means is that the boldness you need is not something you must muster up; it is something you attach yourself to, because it is the boldness of the Spirit already living in you.

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Additionally, it may be helpful to know that the Greek word for boldness appears more than 40 times in the New Testament. It is translated as *bold*, yes, but also as *plain*, as James MacDonald referred to in that opening quote. Maybe you need to tell yourself, *I can be bold, because I can be plain. I can speak a simple message and let Jesus do the rest. And Jesus will do the rest.* It was Jesus who said that by his death he would draw all people to him. Plainly tell the story of Jesus' death and resurrection and what the power of those has done for you, and he will do the drawing.

Now, one more thing before we move on: Pray for boldness. If prayer for boldness was good enough for Paul, it is good enough for us. In your own time of prayer, ask for boldness; but ask others to pray for your boldness, too. This is a great thing to ask for during mutual ministry in your small group! And know, too, that when Paul asked for boldness, he was asking from his current circumstances; he was in chains. You, too, can ask for boldness at specific times and locations where it is especially challenging for you to be bold.

With whom should I share? Red apples and green apples

One of the questions you may have about witnessing to others is who is your target audience? We'll get to that in a minute, but first let's consider what it means to be a witness. The best answer here lies in the recognition that we bear witness to Christ in us by both our words and our deeds. When James wrote about this in his letter to the believers in the early church, he wanted to emphasize that marching around with a megaphone may get the words out there, but if those words are not backed by acts of righteousness that demonstrate the words are coming from a changed person, those words die. Indeed, they represent a dead faith! So your witness before others must be reliable, where consistency in your character is coupled with confidence in your words (or the Holy Spirit's words *through* you, as we just discussed).

What this means is that you already have a built-in audience for your witness. These are the people you see every day: your unbelieving family, friends, co-workers and customers, neighbors,

fellow soccer parents, regular grocery store checkers, and others. Because you see these people regularly, they are always observing you, though some more attentively than others. And if they know you express a faith in Jesus, what they may be looking for is whether you are someone who can and should be trusted with their own faith questions. Are you someone who would pray for them? Are you someone who can be asked to help out in a time of need? Can you be trusted with a confession?

But there are others, too, who may be ready to hear a word from you regarding Jesus. In the circle of Harvest churches, these have become known as “red apples.” Simply, red apples are ripe. And in the way we apply this picture to witnessing, they are ripe to hear the gospel. But here’s the thing. There is often only one way to find out whether they are ripe: Start talking to them about Jesus. Be bold. You might ask whether they go to church in town. This can be a non-threatening way to get the conversation started. But don’t stop there. If they say *no*, you can tell them something like this:

You know, I started attending church because I encountered some stuff in my life that really brought me down. Some of it was junk that other people heaped on me, but a lot of it was my own fault. Anyway, once I got there I found out that Jesus had a lot to say to me. But mostly it was this: “Where you can’t, I can.” That’s what I needed to hear. I knew I couldn’t save myself. In fact, no one can. But Jesus died and rose from the dead to save me. I sure didn’t deserve it, but Jesus basically said, “I don’t care. I love you and I did this for you. Do you want it or not?” I wanted it. And bottom line, it changed my life.

Now, because your usual words probably sound a bit different, you won’t use words quite like that (though, if you’re tempted to plagiarize and memorize all at the same time, we won’t stop you!). But you get the idea. Just share. From your experience. From your heart. From the Holy Spirit’s leading. And then listen, because you’ll hear one of two people responding to you. You’ll hear a ripe red

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apple responding with favor. Or you'll hear an unripe green apple responding with hesitation or even disdain. We'll discuss what you do next below, but first let's look at these possible reactions, because Paul warned us about them in 2 Corinthians:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (2 Corinthians 2:14-16)

There is that idea of Christ's message going out through us. We can't avoid it. We are his witnesses. But notice that the same message (and the same messenger) may be received in two different ways—as a sweet fragrance or an awful stink. To some, the gospel smells like life; to others, it is the odor of death. We cannot control this. We simply lay it out there, as Jesus did, and then we wait to find out whether those who hear us “have ears to hear.”

Helping red apples along. Now let's say the response is positive, that the one with whom you're talking is ripe to listen. What do you do next? Well, you may certainly invite them to church, but there are many reasons they may hesitate. And even if they do come, you are placed in the same position you would be if they showed up this Sunday: You would need to keep the conversation going. The chief reason for this is that the most effective form of communication over time is one-on-one conversation. If your listener comes to church and hears the pastor preach a message that hits home and they decide and pray that day to follow Christ as their Savior and Lord, they are still going to have lots of questions: *What just happened? What do I do next? How do I tell my unbelieving friends what I've done?* You're going to be moving from witness to discipler. You won't be alone in this. Your small group can help welcome this new believer and move into the discipling process with you. But the main contact for a while will be you. And this is especially true

if your ripe apple needs more than one Sunday. They are ready to listen and learn, but the believing part may come four or six or ten weeks later. Stay there. Be a friend and an encourager and even a teacher. And keep praying for this person's salvation.

Dealing with green apples. Sometimes you will encounter those who aren't ready to hear the message. Some may be downright antagonistic. These are the green apples, "not ripe for the pickin'." But this does not mean we abandon them and never come back. In fact, in much the same way as we do with red apples, we must be willing to keep the conversation going and allow our lives to represent Jesus at all times. A passage from Peter's first letter may be encouraging in this regard.

...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:15-16)

We must endeavor never to let down our guard as ambassadors of Christ, because outsiders are watching. We do not know what God has in mind for green apples; they may even turn to Jesus after we are gone, but with our lives in him fixed in their minds.

What if we can't tell the difference? Now there is the matter of knowing the difference, because sometimes those who look like red apples aren't, and the same is true for those who look green. Zacchaeus (in Luke 19) was one of these. No one would have picked this conniving tax collector as the man to whose house salvation would come that day. But it did. And we can use gain two important lessons from the way Jesus interacted with Zacchaeus. First, Jesus recognized the moment. The Bible recognizes *chronos* time, as all of us do. This is time set in chronological order, with one minute and one hour following the next. But it also shows us *kairos* time, when a moment bears special meaning. Here was a man in a tree. Jesus could have brushed him off as a nut. Instead, he saw this as a unique

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opportunity to engage a man in a greater conversation. Second, engage him is exactly what he did; Jesus invited himself over for a meal. Talk about boldness! But Zacchaeus responded favorably, and all those in attendance saw a life changed by Christ in no time.

Finally, there is another category of apple you are likely to encounter. In fact, you may find them in your own family. They are the people who are red on the outside but green on the inside. They speak some Christian language, go to church often enough to feel good about it, and even encourage you in your own faith. But you're not sure whether they truly believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord. To help your own discernment in this case, a couple of diagnostic questions have proven to be powerful.

The first is this: *If you were to die today, do you know what would happen to you?* Some would say no, some would say they don't know. Others might say they are going to heaven, but when you ask them how they know, again they are not sure. Unless a person can tell they know they are going to heaven because Jesus died to forgive their sins and give them his own righteousness as their passport to eternity, this person needs to hear the gospel.

The second diagnostic question that can help tell where a person's truly rests is this: *If God asked you why he should let you into heaven, what answer would you give him?* Again, if the person's answer doesn't include Jesus, they need to hear the gospel. To say they are going to heaven because they have been a good churchgoer or have not done anything "really bad" or because they have been kind to most everyone—these are not answers that hold up against scriptural teaching. We must have Jesus.

Now, before we move on, let's revisit our question from the first chapter. If someone needs to hear the gospel, you have to be prepared to share it with them. So what would you say? In your own words, how would you outline the gospel message?

Little missions and big missions

Before we close this chapter, we want to be sure to draw a line of connection between the individual's work for Christ as a bold ambassador and the church's work together to bring the gospel to the world. Like many Christians, you have probably called this work "missions," and have thought of this as the foreign work of the church. But just as we said when we opened this chapter, the mission of reaching others with the good news of Jesus and moving them into discipleship belongs to us all, in our neighborhoods, in our city, in our nation, and in our world.

At Harvest, this concerted effort is often organized with our partner churches in the Great Commission Collective. In fact, the GCC has two pillars that reach beyond our own—though they are certainly in our heart. The first of these is Purposeful Disciple-Making and the second is Strategic Church Planting. To accomplish the broad mission of the church in places where the language and culture may be different than our own, the GCC churches pool our resources to assist new congregations in getting started at the work of planting discipleship-model congregations, just as we were supported when we planted in Fresno in 2011.

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Matthew 9:35-38.

What do we see in Jesus' heart for the people?

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How are prayer and witness connected in this passage?

Read Acts 1:8.

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in equipping witness?

What geographical pattern for witness do we see in these words of Jesus? According to this, would you say we are called to witness at home or abroad?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:20-21.

How important is a right relationship with God in making us ambassadors of his Son? How does this relationship happen?

Consider the characteristics of an ambassador. Which of these make sense as we represent Christ in the world?

Personal application

What gets in the way of your being bold as a witness for Jesus? Is there a fear of others' reactions, a lack of confidence in your character or ability, a "reasoned theology" that says this is God's sovereign work? How can you overcome these hesitations to get on with the work of ambassadorial witness?

Who are those in your life that you seem to recognize as red apples now? What can you do to increase the conversation with these friends and family about the good news of Jesus? Take time now to pray for these people by name and ask the Lord to make you an instrument in his hands to reach out to them in the near future.

LESSON 6

Pillar 5: Uncommon Community **Discipling in the Fellowship of Believers**

This community thing has to go beyond nice exchanges with our neighbors when we are out in our driveways at the same time. It even has to go beyond sitting in church with others week to week. Community must have depth, because without depth, relationships slither away as soon as life gets difficult. – Bekah Bowman

IF YOU HAVE EVER TAKEN PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION in a big city at a busy time, you know what it means to have your personal space compromised. You're rubbing shoulders with someone who is different in six ways you can see and countless ways you can't. Thirty minutes in such cramped quarters is enough to make an introvert of anyone. And if you're an introvert already, you just might want to sign up for your hermit card.

But we all know this: People are good for us. Though we have moved into a time when we are more cautious of strangers than ever before, it's still nice to be greeted with a smile and a "Good morning!" when passing someone on the street. Such a cordial word can kickstart your day!

Other strangers can enter our lives at hard times and serve us with excellence—a medical specialist who walks us through a challenging diagnosis, a tow truck driver who meets us on the side of

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the road and gets us up and running again, a funeral director who eases our family with a kind heart when we've lost a dear parent. Exchanges like these, you have heard it said, can "restore one's faith in humanity."

But God has a greater plan still for our relationships. In the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the people of Judah had been taken into exile in Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. In those days, God gave Jeremiah this promise: "I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart" (Jeremiah 24:7). From this statement, we gain two vital principles: First, God would reign over his people. Second, God's people were his plurally. God was not choosing one person as the big winner in the cosmic lottery. God had a plan to give a new heart to *them*, to a full group of people.

When we turn the pages of Scripture into the New Testament, we find that nothing has changed. God loves and interacts with his people plurally. In fact, Paul wrote, these people are "the body of Christ," and all the parts of this corporate body are intended to edify one another—that is, to help one another grow up in their faith in Christ.

At Harvest Fresno, we are serious about making disciples, a subject you'll read more about in the next chapter. But we are convinced that the making of disciples is not the work solely of the pastor or the elders; rather, we are certain that God's beloved people are meant to mature as disciples in the context of purposeful community. As they read together, pray together, sing together, think together, and minister together, they will be built up *as one* and *each one*.

Coming together again and again

It doesn't take long when hanging around at Harvest to hear us talking about small groups. Many churches have them, but not all of them think of these groups as integral to what they do. For such churches, small groups are an add-on. Maybe they are a place for the outgoing people to get supercharged by the social interaction, or for the lonely people to find a friend. But at Harvest, we encour-

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age everyone to attend a small group. For one thing, some good research shows that those who demonstrate real spiritual maturity are fed chiefly by three things: frequent Bible reading, frequent Sunday church attendance, and frequent small group participation. And when it comes to small groups, by “frequent,” the researchers mean four to five times per month. In other words, when it comes to discipleship, weekly small group participation is highly valuable.

At Harvest, we typically offer two small group seasons per year—a longer season in the spring and a shorter season in the fall. Normally, the groups meet weekly in homes, with 10-20 people in each group. With time off for the winter holidays and for the summer, groups meet 25-30 weeks per year.

When together, a small group leader guides a discussion through the selected curriculum (the whole church works through the same material at the same time). Then the men and women break out for a time of mutual ministry, which offers us a chance to share needs, confess sins, pray for one another, and offer guidance for personal situations. The group leaders also make themselves available to meet with individual members of the group for longer personal conversations and maybe even biblical counseling.

These are the *hows* of our deeper community, where the gospel is applied to people’s real-life circumstances. But why do we do this and where does it lead?

The wisdom of togetherness

One of the favorite small group studies we have ever gone through as a church was called *A Proverbs Driven Life*, by Anthony Selvaggio. The author broke out the many wise sayings of the book of Proverbs into four themes: words, work, wealth, and relationships. We were reminded with this last theme just how much God cares about the way people relate to one another. This is true because he created every man and woman and wants them all to live in harmony; but it is especially true for those who believe in him, because when we live rightly together, we reflect the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So we do well when we take up the Scriptures, find out how God wants us to live together, then do what he says.

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Let's look at just three proverbs that help us to understand how this works:

Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire;
he breaks out against all sound judgment. (Proverbs 18:1)

Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. (11:14)

A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for adversity. (17:17)

From these three proverbs, we find observed truths, but also calls to action. If it is foolish to live in isolation, we should seek out community. If it is dangerous to act without wise counsel, we should align ourselves with those who can help us think through the decisions in our lives. And if adversity is bound to come, the best thing we can do is find a friend who will stand with us against the harshest storms. In fact, how much better it is if we can find more than one friend like this!

For these reasons, we encourage members and regular attenders at Harvest to be engaged in a small group. You need community to guard you from foolishness; you need shared wisdom to guide you in your choices; and you need true friends who will care enough to show up when life is hard.

There may be seasons when school, work, or other circumstances make it difficult for you to join a small group or keep up regular attendance, but we will always encourage you to do so. Unfortunately, a common characteristic of those who have struggles in life is that they aren't connected with brothers and sisters who can help them along. This is why we want this experience for every adult in our church. (Actually, our Harvest Students ministry employs many of the same practices, so our youth are learning the healthy advantages of close fellowship even as they grow up.)

Of course, stepping into community this way means that you won't always be comfortable, especially at first. It will take time for

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people to get to know you and for the people in your group to trust one another. But we work hard to make our small groups a safe place, where listening is done with sensitivity and confidences are kept. This is where our adherence to the gospel again comes into play, for Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Eyes toward one another

The passage you just read is more important to us than you know. That is because when we consider where uncommon community leads, it is to the practice of “the one anothers.” These are the many teachings of Jesus and the apostles that specify how we are to interact with each other. You see two of them right there in Ephesians 4:32:

- Be kind to one another
- Forgive one another

Depending on the translation you read and who is doing the counting, you find between 40 and 60 one anothers in the Bible. No wonder we want to find out what these are and put them into practice! They are God’s way of doing community. In the questions below, we’ll lead you to some of these directives and encourage you to start applying them today.

Exploring the Scriptures

Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-26.

How do Paul’s words capture your attention here? Which verses particular carry meaning for you?

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Who has brought the body of believers together? How does this make a difference in our commitment to the community of faith? How do you think you are called to contribute to the body of Christ?

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

What four groups of people are noted here and how is each to be treated?

What allows this kind of interaction to happen among believers? Conversely, what things can hinder our ministry to one another?

Read the following passages and make note of the one-another we're called to practice in each one.

1 John 4:7-8

Galatians 5:13

Ephesians 5:21

Hebrews 3:13

Romans 12:10

Considering these one-anothers along with Ephesians 4:32, which we looked at earlier, where have you seen one or more of these one-anothers demonstrated with excellence by someone you know?

Personal application

How does the idea of closer community sit with you? Do you tend to be someone who embraces new relationships or someone who is slower to form connections?

What are your hopes for an uncommon community of brothers and

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sisters in the faith? How might you gain from commitment to such a group?

What are your responsibilities when joining an uncommon community? What can you bring to such a group, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you (consider Romans 12:3-8)?

LESSON 7

Disciples Who Make Disciples

The primary characteristic of a disciple is change demonstrated by a growth in character that requires increasing knowledge, appropriate attitudes, right thoughts, improving relationships, and obedient action. Christ does not change. He is perfect. The disciple's responsibility is to become like Christ. – David Watson & Paul Watson

YOU WON'T GO MORE THAN A WEEK OR TWO on a Sunday morning without hearing the pastor or elders reminding the congregation of the mission of Harvest Fresno: Making disciples who make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Sounds nice and spiritual, doesn't it? Maybe even nice and biblical. But that's the trouble. When we think of disciples in the Bible, we have a pretty good idea what we're talking about—some dusty-footed guys named Peter, James, John, and a few others, walking around Israel, doing their best to make sense of Jesus (first) and do what he told them (second). But what can those guys possibly mean to us today, especially since we don't have Jesus here in the flesh to lead us?

Let's be careful first of all to recognize that Jesus' physical absence is no problem. Jesus himself said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). That's a pretty amazing promise. As Pastor J.D. Greear

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says in fleshing out this verse: “The Spirit inside you is greater than Jesus beside you.” If Jesus promised to give us the Holy Spirit after he himself ascended to heaven, we have to assume that Jesus knew what he was doing. He was supplying us with all the guidance and encouragement we would need to follow him just like those first disciples did.

One more thing that’s important to know now: The first disciples were not limited to twelve. Yes, twelve were chosen for a closer walk with Jesus, as it were, and eventually eleven of these men became known as apostles. But many others were also called disciples—men and women alike. Nearly all of them are nameless to us, but they were counted among those who had dedicated themselves to learning from Jesus and following his words and his way. In every other way, these disciples may have been “average Joes,” but the fact that they followed Jesus lifted them out of the common life lived on earth and planted them in the very kingdom of God. When you choose to do the same—to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33)—you too can be called a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The call to disciple others

Before we talk about the kind of disciples we want to see developed at Harvest, let’s consider whether we are right in being motivated to do such work. It’s one thing for the Savior of the world to gather, teach, and train disciples, but is this something a few regular Christians should be doing? Is this the work only of leaders like pastors and elders, or can anyone do it?

At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus gave his disciples a significant instruction that has long been known as the Great Commission. That is, Jesus commissioned his disciples to a certain work, and that work would be exceedingly important. Look at his words from Matthew 28:

“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 com-

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manded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Before considering the commission itself, notice the closing line of Jesus’ words, because there again he speaks of being with us always, which is what he does by his Holy Spirit. We are not alone in our practice of discipleship; Jesus is here.

Now let’s consider the commission. It begins with the word *go*. This is not a word that suggests a geographical going, though we do find that instruction later in the sentence: “of all nations.” Rather, in Matthew 28, the idea of “go” is to get moving, to be about the business of, to be active. Whether we stay at home or go abroad, we are to engage ourselves in the work of disciple-making.

And there is the work itself: make disciples. We don’t accident upon disciples or hope they come to us. We don’t only pray that the process will work out (though this is a fine prayer). Instead, we are intentional in what we are doing, making disciples in the same way that a potter would make a pitcher or a carpenter would build cabinets. There is a plan and a process and a practice—and yes, prayer—to getting it done.

In the midst of this process, we find two specific practices. The first is to baptize those who would be disciples. We discuss our beliefs about baptism in a later chapter, but suffice it to say here that because baptism is a strong analogous action wherein those who are baptized identify with the death and resurrection of Jesus and signify their own move into a new life, we want everyone who believes to be baptized, and we want them to participate in baptism as soon as they can after confirming their trust in Jesus.

The second practice is to teach new disciples everything that Jesus commanded. That’s a big task! It means we must know all that Jesus commanded; so to be those who make disciples, we must prepare ourselves as teachers. This does not necessarily mean we will stand in front of the church and preach, or even that we will teach a Sunday school class or small group (though we would love everyone to reach this level of maturity and knowledge!). What it does mean is that you can sit down one-on-one with a new believer

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and walk them through the Scriptures that reveal how Christ would have us live, challenging them (along with yourself!) to obey what they learn in God's word.

And now, be sure to catch this one other principle. If we are teaching others to do all that Jesus commanded, then we are teaching them to fulfill the Great Commission—to make disciples. It's an endlessly perpetuating command, and it's why we are dedicated at Harvest to keep the work going.

Three functions of a disciple

At Harvest, we advance three aspects of following Christ. We teach that disciples:

- Worship Christ
- Walk with Christ
- Work for Christ

Let's consider each of these a bit more closely.

Worshipping Christ. To worship Christ is not about a particular posture or style of music or pious vocabulary. Rather, to worship Christ is to recognize in him the qualities and characteristics of his person and his work, and then to praise him for those things. As an example, Christ endured pain, ridicule, and death for us by submitting to the will of the Father. When we see how he did this, we can thank him for his obedience and long-suffering, for his sacrifice and his love. We may do this in prayer or in song or in preaching or in sharing his goodness with a friend over coffee, and in any of these occasions we are worshipping Jesus by extoling his excellent work.

The reason worship is so important is that we would not be able to endure the hardships of walking with Christ or working for him without first having a recognition of his preeminent greatness and his amazing sacrifice for us. This understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for us provides the motivation that keeps us going when we would otherwise fall into laziness, discouragement, or simple avoidance of our calling.

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We should also say that while we may worship on our own with the music we play while driving across town or out for walk, and in the same way we may worship Christ in smaller groups (including our families), the corporate worship that happens when God's people make a joyful noise together in fellowship encourages us to express ourselves "in spirit and in truth," praising God with energy and laying hold of the excellencies we learn in the lyrics.

Walking with Christ. When the first disciples walked with Christ, they did so to be near him, to see what he did in a variety of circumstances. They saw him heal the sick, cast out demons, render forgiveness to "big sinners," confront the Pharisees; they heard him teach in the synagogue and on the mountain and in the streets. They didn't just show up to class for an hour each day, take some notes, and head on their way, cramming a few weeks later for a test of their knowledge. No, this was life as it was meant to be lived, and it could only be learned by living life where Jesus was living it. Jesus plainly told them, "The Son of Man has no place to lay his head," yet they followed all the same. They couldn't get enough of this man.

When we walk with Jesus in our own lives, we do so by learning, by prayer, and by action. That is, we come to the Scriptures looking for Jesus and wanting to see what our life with him should look like. In prayer, we ask him to show us how his word should be applied to the circumstances and arenas of our own life. And then we go do what we are called to do, loving him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbors as we would love ourselves. This has been called the Jesus Creed, and while we have many other specific instructions to guide us, they are, as Jesus said, summed up under these two. Love God, love others. In walking with Jesus, we love him when we obey him.

We also like to say that walking with Jesus is done with two feet: your individual foot and your corporate foot. That is, you want to be learning in your own time of worship and study and prayer and action, but you also need to be doing these same things with other believers.

You have probably noticed that we call the second half of our

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small group times “mutual ministry.” This is because we believe that the men and women of God possess truths from God’s word with which to encourage and challenge one another (in fact, we hope that in our small groups, we are helping each other fulfill all “the one anothers” of Scripture). Some also have the experience of a long walk with Jesus, and the wisdom they have learned from both failures and forgiveness, and from applying the word and seeing it come to fruition in their lives, is something we cannot find anywhere else.

In our small groups, we seek and train leaders for the specific work of shepherding. Shepherding falls under the tasks given to elders, but as a church grows and more people need direct soul care and biblical counseling, it becomes imperative to have others who are trained specifically for this important work in the discipleship structure. At Harvest, men and women both are identified and trained as small group leaders, because men and women both need shepherding care. As you connect with a small group, your leaders there are the first people you should go to for personal spiritual help—and if you are engaged with your small group and open about yourself during the time of mutual ministry, your shepherd-leader may see that you’re in need of help even before you do! You are always welcome to contact the pastors or one of the elders when you have a critical need, but depending on the situation the first thing they may ask you is, “Have you talked to your small group leader about this?” Growing as a disciple of Christ happens when we have shepherds watching out for us and showing us the way. At Harvest, we think our structure of leadership, beginning with the close-in shepherding of the small group leaders, allows us to do this well.

Working for Christ. Finally, there is the matter of working for Christ. In Ephesians 2, Paul made it absolutely clear that there are no works we can do that will save us. If there were, we would go around boasting of our accomplishments (isn’t that a sad picture?). But right after making this clear, the apostle went on to write: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

We don’t give our lives to Jesus and then lay back as though

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there is nothing to be done. In fact, to do so is to enter into a heresy called antinomianism, which presumes upon the grace of God like a mooching child who will take no responsibility even though he has been given every privilege.

What we are to do instead is look for work that contributes to the fellowship of the church and the needs of the people. Sometimes this is done on a Sunday morning, fulfilling one of the many roles that make our service happen: setup and teardown, ushering, greeting, nursery care or Sunday school teaching, audio-visual assistance, worship team, and more. It may involve hosting or leading a small group. It may come through working with our service ministries at a nearby school. But it can also be less formal than this. Working for Christ can come in your neighborhood or at your job, where you openly carry the message of Christ as a conversational evangelist. You may be gifted with mercy and write notes or make phone calls to those you know need a kind word today.

Working for Christ may seem like something we do out of obligation, and in a way it is. We were bought with a price, Scripture tells us. And while we cannot return the favor in a *quid pro quo* sort of way (“I’ll do this for you if you do that for me”), we can respond to the unmerited favor Christ has shown us by submitting to his lordship and serving him as a bondsman whose every day is given to him out of gratitude for his unmatched mastery. On the other hand, if we “worship while we work,” we may go through each day serving Jesus without a weight of duty but instead with a bounce in our serving step. Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). This does not mean every endeavor in his kingdom will be a breeze—perhaps far from it! But it does mean that he is there to bear with us every heavy load that comes our way.

Exploring the Scriptures

Identify the characteristics of a disciple of Jesus as shown in the following passages:

Matthew 4:18-22

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Matthew 16:24-25

John 8:31-32

John 13:35

John 14:21

John 15:8

Matthew 28:19-20

Read Titus 2:1-14.

What specifics in this passage demonstrate that discipleship is both practical and spiritual?

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Read Proverbs 27:17 and 1 Corinthians 11:1.

What do these passages point to in terms of the way we are discipled to follow Jesus?

Read 2 Timothy 2:2.

What does this passage convey to us about the “generations” of discipleship?

Personal application

When you consider the chapter and the passages we have read, how would you assess yourself as a disciple of Christ? Where is it easy for you to follow and obey? Where are you still growing in the Lord?

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Who has God given to you to disciple you—teach, train, and hold you accountable? What qualities does this person possess that are a motivation and example to you?

Who has God given to you to disciple—to teach, train, and hold accountable? What qualities do you bring to the process to help those you are discipling?

LESSON 8

Two Ordinances

AT HARVEST FRESNO, we practice two ordinances in our church. While we would not argue that these practices are sacred in and of themselves in the way that other churches may speak of sacraments, we do insist that both baptism (a unique experience) and communion (a regular practice) are practiced in the life of anyone who makes a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Let's examine these ordinances one at a time.

THE ORDINANCE OF BAPTISM

Baptism separates the tire kickers from the car buyers. – Max Lucado

In Acts 2, Peter preached a message of salvation through Christ to the assembled crowds in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. It was the first great sermon of the church and it was ignited by the Holy Spirit. In it, Peter declared that Jesus, who had been accredited by signs and wonders, had done his greatest work on the cross, where he was sent by those who thought they could kill him. But he rose from the dead, proving he was the promised Messiah (Savior) of the people.

When he had finished his sermon, the people were deeply convicted and asked, "What shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the

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forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Baptism was not a new idea to the Jewish people. They recognized it as an act of cleansing, and John the Baptist had baptized many, including Jesus. Now Peter was pulling this act through into the New Testament church, where it provided another important picture for those who believe in Jesus: an identity with his death (going down into the water) and his resurrection (coming up out of the water). For this reason, many people describe their participation in baptism as deeply meaningful in their walk of faith—and this is understandable!

Now let’s address some key questions surrounding baptism.

Who should be baptized?

At Harvest Fresno, we require believer’s baptism for membership. That means that you should be baptized as one who believes Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior. This is not a light decision, and we encourage you to consider baptism carefully. At the same time, we don’t find a reason to hesitate. Nearly all the examples of baptism we see in Acts involve people being baptized as soon as possible. If you believe and have not yet been baptized, we urge you to do so. If you have been baptized as a believer in another church, you do not need to be baptized again in order to be a member at Harvest.

Is baptism required to be saved?

Baptism is not required for salvation. We know this because Jesus told the thief next to him on the cross that the thief would join him in paradise that day. This would not have been possible if baptism were required for salvation. However, again and again we see believers being baptized at their first opportunity in Scripture, so baptism is something every believer should desire.

What about infant baptism?

Quite a few denominations (including a number of our Reformed brothers and sisters) practice infant baptism. Many do this as a part of covenant theology, bringing children under the New Covenant

promise their parents have received in Christ. They would not argue that these children are believers, but they draw connections to the spiritual nature of circumcision. Other churches baptize infants as the first step to lifetime participation in the church. We find no firm biblical case for either of these practices. The baptisms we see in the New Testament are entered into by adults who believe in Jesus. Therefore, this is what we practice. We do provide for parents the opportunity to dedicate their children to the Lord, as Jesus' own parents did at the temple.

Some adults want to know if their baptism as an infant “counts” as baptism in the way we believe at Harvest. Simply, we would say no. Because we believe that baptism is an act done as one who has professed faith in Jesus, we encourage those who have been baptized only as infants to be baptized as believers. And again, we require this of those who would join us in membership.

Sprinkling or immersion?

Again, you will find that baptisms are performed in two different ways in churches. One is by sprinkling, the other by immersion under water. Sprinkling is convenient, especially when infants are being baptized, and can be done without a special location or baptismal. However, as we have already noted, if baptism provides an identifying act with the death and resurrection of Christ, this cannot be found in sprinkling. Thus, at Harvest Fresno, we baptize by immersion, often using a river or pool.

Baptism and discipleship

When Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commission, he told them to “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” (Matthew 28:19). If you are baptized at Harvest Fresno as a step in your own discipleship process, you will be asked to affirm your faith in Jesus Christ, and we will baptize you “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

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Exploring the Scriptures

Read Acts 8:26-40.

How integral was baptism to the Ethiopian eunuch's salvation experience?

How does the fact that he took the initiative to be baptized excite you toward the baptism of all new believers (and maybe yourself)?

How does going "down into the water" indicate the form that baptism should take?

Read Romans 6:3-11.

Describe the picture of baptism given to us in this passage.

According to Paul's words here, what should our lives look like after we have identified with Christ in his death and resurrection?

Read Luke 3:16.

Beyond water baptism, what is God looking to do in our lives when we identify with Christ?

How has the Holy Spirit influenced your own life since the day of your salvation?

Personal application

Have you been baptized? If not, what is keeping you from doing so? If so, what do you remember about the meaning of this experience in your life?

How might you encourage and support others in their baptism?

THE ORDINANCE OF COMMUNION

No doubt a man may be saved, like the penitent thief, without having received the Lord's Supper. It is not a matter of absolute and indispensable necessity, like repentance, faith, and conversion. But it is impossible to say that any professing Christian is in a safe, healthy, or satisfactory condition of soul, who habitually refuses to obey Christ and attend the Lord's Table. – J.C. Ryle

On the night he would be betrayed, Jesus met his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem to eat the Jewish Passover meal. This “Last Supper” in terms of the final meal Jesus would eat before his crucifixion actually set the stage for a meal that believers would share regularly in the life of the church.

Depending on your church tradition, this meal may be called “the Lord’s Supper,” “the Lord’s table,” “communion,” or “the Eucharist.” All of these names point to the same practice. What differs is whether the local church believes this meal to be a sacrament (an act that is sacred in and of itself) or an ordinance (an observance that demonstrates a person’s faith and commitment to Jesus).

At Harvest Fresno, you will normally hear us call this meal communion or the Lord’s Supper. We practice it (as we do baptism) as an ordinance, according to Jesus’ own instruction: “Do this in remembrance of me.” While we do not believe that either communion or baptism is necessary for salvation, we do encourage everyone who has repented and entered salvation through Jesus Christ to be baptized and to regularly participate in communion.

For us, communion is a corporate activity of the church, led by the pastor or elders. The elders, deacons, and other leaders may assist in serving communion. Holding to the practice of “open communion,” all in attendance who have received Christ as Savior (and not just members) are invited to participate. Parents should be the judge of their own children’s readiness to take communion.

The expression “take communion” derives from the idea that one will ingest the two elements of the meal: bread and drink. The first of these, the bread, is representative of the body of Christ. Although Jesus’ words to the disciples were “this is my body,” we do

not hold to the belief that he meant this was his literal body (which is what you will find among those who adhere to the doctrine of transubstantiation). Instead, Jesus spoke and meant this as a metaphor for the way his body would be broken in death on the cross.

The second element of communion is the drink. For Jesus and the disciples, this was wine, a common drink of the day. To accommodate children and those who may struggle with alcohol, either physically or in their conscience, we use grape juice in the cups we distribute. The drink, in Jesus' words, represents "the blood of the new covenant." He would shed his blood on the cross to cover our sin.

Personal preparation for communion

Because communion is repeated monthly at Harvest, and sometimes more frequently than this in other churches, we run the risk of falling into a rote religious act that loses its meaning and purpose. To combat this, we encourage every participant to prepare for communion. This is an act of the heart and can be done in two ways.

First, anticipate communion. If you are not aware that communion will take place before you arrive, you may see a note in the bulletin or communion tables set up at the front of the auditorium. Using these cues, you can take some time to pray that the Lord will make communion a right remembrance of the love Jesus showed for you when he gave his life to purchase your salvation. An awareness of this love will soften your heart and increase your appreciation afresh for the work of Jesus on the cross.

Second, you may recognize the need to confess your sins to receive the forgiveness of Christ for the day. Jesus is ready and pleased to deliver this forgiveness and to cleanse your heart and renew your mind. This puts you in a good place to participate in communion because you are not carrying the weight of these sins on your conscience at the same time you are honoring Christ in taking communion. As a final note on this matter, it is vital to remember Jesus' teaching on forgiveness: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive

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others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14-15). If you need to forgive someone before the Lord, do so as you prepare for communion. And if you need to ask or give forgiveness to someone in the congregation, we strongly encourage you to do so before taking communion.

Exploring the Scriptures

Read Luke 22:14-20.

What did Jesus know was coming when he sat down with the apostles for this meal?

What applications did he give to the bread and the cup?

What command did he give them to close verse 19?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

From the context of the opening paragraph, how did the communion meals of the early church likely look different than our communion observance today?

In verses 23-25, Paul reiterated Jesus’ teaching to remember him through the communion meal. In verse 26, what did Paul say this practice accomplishes?

In what way was the communion meal of the early church getting out of hand?

Do you think it is possible to take the communion in this unworthy fashion today? Or are there other ways we may come to the communion table unworthily?

Personal application

How often would you say you are intentionally engaged in communion when it is offered at a Sunday service?

Would you confess to having taken communion in an unworthy fashion? What was the reason behind this?

How might you increase your own readiness for communion?

LESSON 9

Church Leadership

Shepherding, like parenting, requires patience. This kind of work is not done in a single sermon or in a day. Sometimes, of course, God does cause breakthroughs in a single sermon or crucial conversation. But usually the work of eldering is as repetitive and daily as walking the flock to a fresh field for grazing. It is like making the daily meals, or taking the kids to school. – Mark Dever

THE LIFE OF A SHEPHERD may have appeal to you. All those days with the open fields before you and time to think quietly. No rat race here. No obligations to social media or email. Take a deep breath of fresh air and enjoy the idea.

But then there are the sheep. Their ongoing need for care: pasture, water, protection, mobility. If you've ever been a mom or dad or babysitter or teacher, you have a good idea what's going on here. If you're grandparent, you may have an even better idea, because a weekend with the grandkids can shut you down for a week. There's so much to do!

Intriguingly, the Scripture is full of illustrative connections between shepherds and sheep. The Great Shepherd, we know, is Jesus. And we are, as the psalmist wrote, the sheep of God's pasture. That is, we're the ones who require all that care. Yet from among these sheep, God calls out some to serve as undershepherds to Christ.

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They are the men known as elders and their role in the church is to care for the sheep. It is, Paul wrote to Timothy, a noble thing to desire such a role, but its requirements and activities are significant and ongoing. As pastor Mark Dever says above, it's a job that requires patience because it is normally a job done over long stretches of time—as long as people live.

At Harvest Fresno, our leadership structure is built on the foundation of Christ and the function of the elders as outlined in Scripture. In this chapter, we will look closely at the passages that explain the purpose and role of the elders.

Who are elders?

The Greek words *episkopē* and *presbyteros* are translated in three different ways as they are applied to leaders in the local church: bishop, overseer, elder. The selection of which word is used often depends on the church tradition of the translator. In some denominations, you may find more than one of these employed, with greater authority given to one over the other. We do not find real differentiation in Scripture, and we have chosen to use the common evangelical choice of elder.

Elders as they are described by Paul to Timothy are effectively defined by their character. We will explore the specific characteristics of an elder in our Scripture study below, but generally they demonstrate a reliable and consistent character over time and whether they are at home, in the marketplace, or in the church.

The same passage (1 Timothy 3) that outlines the nature of an elder also defines what qualifies a person to be a deacon in the church. With one notable difference, these defining characteristics are the same. The difference lies here: an elder is “able to teach.” Of course, all disciples of Jesus should be learning unto teaching, especially of their own families in their homes. Additionally, many teach in places in the church—children’s ministry and small groups are two important examples, but also in one-to-one mutual ministry—and yet they would not be called as elders. When we affirm elders in our church, we are saying that they have the heart and the understanding of God’s word to “rightly divide” it and present it to

the full congregation.

At Harvest Fresno, though we may have many spiritually qualified men among us who could serve as elders, we do not affirm elders frequently. This is because there are many factors to consider, including the demands on a man's life at the time, his willingness to serve, or the present needs of the church. However, we consider it part of the discipling process that men would be moving toward leadership of all kinds, including eldership.

Notice that we have said we *affirm* elders. We do not nominate and elect them, as you would find in other church structures. Rather, we support the development of godly men, and when we recognize that a man may be ready to move into eldership, we bring him alongside our current elders for a season to measure interest, dedication, and unity. Then if a man and his wife are willing and the current elders deem it is time, they will inform the congregation that the man is being advanced for eldership. A short period is allowed for the congregation to bring any concerns either to the potential elder or the current elders, and if none arises, the current elders will affirm and install the new elder before the congregation. No fixed term of service is applied. Elders may serve as long as God allows.

A plurality of leaders

The apostles, in establishing and mentoring leaders in the early local churches, spoke always of "elders" in the plural sense. Though a church may identify a senior or lead pastor, as we do at Harvest Fresno, this pastor is first among equals in the body of elders.

Together the elders at Harvest Fresno:

- Establish, maintain, and protect the doctrine, direction, and discipline of the church.
- Take the lead in teaching the Scriptures during worship service, as well as choosing or recommending the curriculum for teaching in other areas of the church, including children's and student ministries and small groups.
- Shepherd the members and regular attenders of the church, emphasizing their spiritual needs but also ministering in

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- times of physical, emotional, or relational need. As we discussed in chapter 6, the shepherding work is intentionally shared with small groups leaders, who serve as “first responders” in the work of soul care and biblical counseling.
- Apply church discipline as necessary to restore a sinning member or regular attender to the fellowship of believers.
 - Oversee the organizational concerns of the church, including fiscal matters. (Note: The elders in general, and especially the pastor, at Harvest Fresno are not aware of the individual giving of the members of the church.)
 - Develop and install the deacons, as well as disciple and oversee other ministry leaders in the church. In this same vein, the elders rely on the deacons and other leaders to handle certain aspects of the ministry and to offer valuable input and feedback in the decision making of the elders.

Currently, the elders at Harvest Fresno usually meet twice each month to exercise mutual ministry among themselves, address general prayer needs of the church, consider the curricular needs of the church, take up personal matters among the membership, and manage other organizational aspects of the church as needed.

An elder-ruled church

With all this in mind, you may already recognize that Harvest Fresno is what is known as an elder-ruled church. Other churches may be governed by the pastor alone, by a block of leaders elected by the congregation (in the Presbyterian church, example, this group is called the “session”), or by the congregation as a whole. However, when we read through the only original source we have (the Bible) for guiding the structure of the early church, we find only the model of eldership. The elders are called and they govern.

In so doing, the elders must maintain both authority and humility. They are a council of men, so they will not make every decision perfectly. They will make mistakes, both in the short- and long-term. But a godly council of elders will make every effort to make proper, God-honoring, people-loving decisions. They will

seek the Holy Spirit's guidance at every turn. And when they make errors, they will seek forgiveness and make restitution as necessary. Elders are not immune to the flesh and themselves may be subject to church discipline if their conduct includes unrepentant and serious sin (1 Timothy 5:20). These latter scenarios are grievous; no church wants to see them happen. For this reason, the work of the imperfect church is to lift up the imperfect elders, so that as closely as possible their shepherding work among the people may reflect the heart and mind of God.

Men in the lead

By now it is probably clear to you that the eldership of Harvest Fresno is limited to males. This is certainly not always the popular stance, as an increasing number of churches are raising up female elders and allowing women to preach to the full congregation. We appeal to Scripture, where we find a consistent reference to elders as men only. Perhaps most recognized among these passages is 1 Timothy 2:12-14:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Immediately we can see several things in this passage, which closely precedes the outline of an elder's characteristics in 1 Timothy 3.

First, Paul was writing his counsel to the young pastor, Timothy, telling him that he does not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man. This fits alongside Paul's unique characteristic of an elder: the ability to teach. If elders are the teachers of the congregation and only men are allowed to teach, then only men would qualify as elders. And indeed, the description of elders speaks of men and of their wives.

Second, Paul said that a woman is to remain quiet. This does not mean at all times and in all places. In the synagogue and other places that the early church met, however, it was common for discussion

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to arise among the attendees during a service. Paul was limiting this public discussion to men.

Third, Paul based his reasoning on the Old Testament Scriptures, where the roles of men and women were established in a certain order, as man (Adam) was created before woman (Eve) and Eve was first to enter into sin.

This final point gives rise to what has become known in recent decades of the church as complementarianism. This is a fancy word (its opposite being egalitarianism) that means men and women were designed from the beginning to complement one another. Take note here. Men and women may also compliment (say nice things) to each other, but the spelling is not the same, nor is the meaning. When two things complement each other, they are of equal worth and they fit together, but they are not the same in all aspects. Scripture points to these differences from the beginning, and Paul affirmed them when he established the roles for leadership in the church.

And yet... women may lead. Although Paul, through the Holy Spirit's inspiration, taught that men alone should teach and lead the full congregation, just as they are to be the spiritual leaders in their home, women play important leadership roles in several regards. Mature, godly women should be leading and teaching other women (Titus 2:3-5). We have already discussed how this happens in small groups, where women serve alongside men in the shepherding work that supports the discipleship process. Additionally, women play a vital role in the spiritual upbringing of children. Indeed, Paul enthusiastically traced Timothy's spiritual lineage to the young man's mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5).

The elders of Harvest Fresno, though convinced of the proper place of male eldership only, want to be careful in every regard to honor women as the co-equal creation of God. They are intellectually and spiritually as capable of excellence as men (and often exceed them!). The elders value the insight and opinions of women and will often not make decisions without having first invited the counsel of women who understand aspects of the ministry in a way that men do not or are not positioned to do. In the end, however,

the authority of decision making (as well as the responsibility both going into and coming out of decisions) rests with men. Likewise, the authority and the responsibility of teaching the full congregation rests with men. For this reason, we come back to the humility required of the elders and the support required of the congregation in light of this Scripture: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:1-2).

Exploring the Scriptures

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-12.

What characteristics are expected of a church’s leadership, including elders (ESV: “overseers”) and deacons?

How does this list support an integration of faith and righteousness in the leaders’ lives?

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Read 1 Peter 5:1-4.

What is the role of the elders as outlined here by Peter? How are they to do this job?

How can you support the leaders in their work?

Personal application

How important is the leadership structure of the church to you? Has this chapter confirmed your beliefs or caused you to see things in a new way?

How do you assess the leadership of a local church? Do you take time to get to know the leaders, or is this somewhat intimidating to you?

Church Leadership 91

When you examine the characteristics of church leaders, would you say you are moving toward greater righteousness in these areas in your own life? How is this connected to your discipleship? How can others pray for you that the Lord may bring you to new heights in these matters?

LESSON 10

Church Discipline

Behind church discipline is one of the grand projects of redemptive history—the project of restoring God’s fallen people to the place where they will once more image God as they extend his benevolent and life-producing rule throughout creation. – Jonathan Leeman

YES OR NO: The least likely reason people go to church is for the discipline.

On the surface, this may seem like a trick question with an obvious answer. Why would anyone ask for discipline? Don’t we all prefer to rule ourselves? We do. Except when we do not trust ourselves to make the best decisions for ourselves.

You have friends who go to the gym on a regular basis. You may go there yourself. Part of the reason people pay to belong to a gym and pay even more to work with a trainer is because they cannot rely on their own discipline to do push-ups at home or jog several miles or eat well. They need accountability. And whether we ask a partner to go to the gym with us or we pay a professional trainer, we submit ourselves to discipline if we believe this is the only way we can achieve the proper outcome—which in the case of our physical selves includes strength and endurance.

So now we might be able to reflect more accurately on the choice to attend church because, in going, others will help us gain and sus-

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tain measures of spiritual accountability.

In the church, we find that discipline comes to us from three sources: God, the elders of the church, and brothers and sisters equally committed to growth in the Lord.

First, we read that God, like a father, disciplines those he loves. Don't miss the foundation there: a loving God provides loving discipline. In Hebrews 12, we read that this is a given: "For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" The writer then goes on to say that if God does not discipline us, we are illegitimate children. If we are to be counted among God's children, we should expect discipline from him; we should even seek it out.

Such discipline does not mean chastisement, where penalties are applied to whip someone into shape. Discipline may be hard, but this does not mean it must be harsh. God's discipline, laced with love, will challenge us in ways we have never been challenged, but the purpose in this work is to produce excellence in us: "...he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness" (Hebrews 12:10).

Second, we submit ourselves to the authorities in the church, who are the elders. When we do this, we are recognizing that while they are not perfect, these elders have been sanctified for the work of leadership, been given a special measure of wisdom, and will look to dispense necessary discipline as God does—leading with love and grace.

You should be able to recognize this love and grace in the leaders of any church, but we hope this is especially true at Harvest Fresno. You should also see in them a humility that has no interest in lording their authority over others but through which they take the role of caring for God's people quite seriously. Look: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews 13:17). The elders in the church understand that they have been given a task that requires of them a heightened level of accountability. If you choose to entrust your spiritual care—and your spiritual discipline—to these leaders, you should be able to

trust that they are caring for you with their own souls on the line.

Third, when we come to the church and ask for help in acquiring and maintaining discipline, we ask our brothers and sisters to hold us accountable. For us, this is done through the mutual ministry time of small groups, where we help each other apply the Scriptures to our lives, exhorting one another to live out what God wants of us. We pray for one another and encourage one another to “hold fast” in the faith.

Formal discipline

Beyond the general principle of discipline, however, we find in Scripture principles of specific formal discipline. The purpose of such action is to keep God’s people set apart as those who worship and honor him. While he will give us grace when we sin and rebel from his ways then return to him with repentance, we are never to take his grace lightly: “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1-2). For this reason, when a man or woman who is a member or regular attender of the church persists in sin without repentance, the elders are compelled to begin a process of discipline for the purpose of restoring the sinner to the Lord and to the body of believers.

In 1 Corinthians 5, a particular member of the local church was making a mockery of the faith by telling everyone that he was committed to the faith while at the same time engaging in an improper sexual relationship. Sexual sin is not the only sin for which a sinner may be rebuked; any sin may lead to this sort of discipline. What is more important to see in this passage are (1) that the sinner was pretending to be a faithful follower of Jesus when his sins said otherwise, and (2) that Paul urged the leaders of the church to remove this man from the congregation until such time as he repented and was willing to be restored.

In our time, this sort of church discipline is not common. The rise of large churches makes it nearly impossible for the elders to hold individual members accountable for the righteousness they should display as those professing faith in Christ. Additionally, few-

er and fewer churches employ traditional membership structures. Without these, discipline cannot easily be applied, organizationally or legally. No one really wants to be busy about the work of disciplining others—and when righteousness is in place, such discipline isn't necessary. But when discipline is set aside for expediency or to avoid conflict, the gospel is compromised by those who insist they can enjoy the wonders of grace without honoring the price that was paid by Christ to secure our forgiveness and salvation.

The process of discipline

The possibility of formal discipline begins when someone becomes a member. Occasionally, a person wants to identify with Harvest Fresno without becoming a member. While this is not preferred, we understand that by reasons of personal conviction or ongoing affiliation with a church in another area, say, some people do not become members. In this case, our bylaws still recognize these people as regular attenders, and we ask them to take a stance for righteous living when they worship and serve among us. For this reason, both members and regular attenders may be subject to formal discipline in the case of unrepentant sin.

When a person's sin becomes known to the others in the church, we turn to Matthew 18 for guidance in how to walk through the discipline that brings restoration. Ahead of any intervention the church might consider, we find Jesus, who has already established the method we should apply in restoring a sinful brother or sister to fellowship. The members and elders carry out what Christ has put in place. Look:

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

These are Jesus' words to the disciples and they unpack a three-step process.

The first obligation in challenging a sinner is for the one who is sinned against to address the sin. This may be very difficult to do. To confront someone alone may feel unsafe. But as far as it is possible, this is where Jesus encouraged the restoration to begin.

If you make an attempt to address the sin with a brother or sister and there is no move toward repentance or restoration, then you would enlist another to go with you. This may be someone else in your small group, your small group leader, or perhaps another leader in the church, including a deacon or elder. Again, the design here is to come with loving concern for the person's soul. Make it clear what sin is in question, how it is affecting others, and what needs to be done. Ask the sinner to consider their actions and the way their sin reflects on the Lord and the church. At this stage, just as with the previous one and the next, your chief desire is that the sinner will be restored to faith and to fellowship.

It is sadly possible, however, that the sinner will remain unrepentant. In this case, Jesus said, the sin should be made known to the church and the sinner should be rebuked and put out of the congregation. Because this is a significant and public step, the elders at Harvest Fresno normally insert an additional step before the public announcement of the sin and subsequent dismissal of the member. This step involves sending the sinner a letter outlining the sin and the options for the sinner: repent or be dismissed. (It is also very common for the elders to attempt to engage the sinner in personal meetings and/or biblical counseling for the sake of restoration. In other words, no one is dismissed without many attempts at setting things right.)

A period of restoration

While sinners sometimes do not repent and formal discipline leading to dismissal is employed, we find that many believers, when confronted with their sin, realize the error of their ways and begin the process of being restored. Depending on the nature and depth of the sin, we may recommend a period of restoration. This is espe-

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cially true if the sinner has been involved in public ministry, including worship, small group leadership, children's or student ministry, ushering, and others. During this time, we ask that the member re-dedicate themselves to personal study and prayer and to the proper leadership of/participation in their family. The length of this restoration period is variable, but typically we look at a timeframe of six to twelve months, with periodic check-ins. If the member being restored is married, we will also involve the spouse in these check-ins.

We primarily look for two characteristics during this period of restoration: humility and repentance. Humility is an understanding that a sin has been committed (often habitually) and this sin was both committed before the Lord and had consequences for others. By adopting a humble attitude, the sinner confesses the sin and replaces themselves under the authority of God and the church leaders. Repentance, which means a turning toward righteousness, is demonstrated over time. A person may express contrition but have no interest in lasting change; this is not repentance. One who is committed to a long-term change, however, will demonstrate fruit in keeping with that change—it will be noticeable.

Exploring the Scriptures

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 and Titus 3:9-11.

What commonalities do you find in these passages? What differences?

The Thessalonian letter was written to a local church; the Titus letter was written to a pastor. Whose work is it to address sin in the congregation? What should the spirit and goal of that work be?

Read Hebrews 13:7 & 17.

How are members of a church supposed to interact with the leaders (elders) of the church?

How can you support the leaders in their work?

Read 2 Corinthians 13:1-10.

What role was Paul reluctant but willing to take up in confronting the sins of the Corinthian church?

How do verses 5-7 suggest people might be preemptive in addressing the sin that needs to be addressed in their lives?

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Personal application

How can self-discipline keep a believer from needing to be disciplined by the church? How often do you “examine yourself” to uncover and confess sin that could undermine your faith?

How easy is it for you to accept that God’s discipline is for your good? What makes you most likely to resist this discipline?

What makes you most uncomfortable about the practice of church discipline? How can the spirit and goal of such discipline make all the difference in its right application?

What are two or three things you are willing to commit to pray with regard to the discipline of God’s people at Harvest Fresno?

LESSON 11

Human Sexuality

Nothing has stolen more dreams, dashed more hopes, broken up more families, and messed up more people... than our propensity to disregard God's commands regarding sexual purity. – Andy Stanley

THE CHAPTER AHEAD is different than those you have read so far. You might pick up quickly that it has an “official” tone to it. That’s because it is excerpted from our bylaws.

The bylaws outline the formal structure of any nonprofit organization like a church. Most of the wording of bylaws pertains to the mission of the organization and the governmental structure. It can be pretty dry stuff. But the bylaws also outline expectations of members, so these need to be shared with you, whether you are a member or a regular attender. In the bylaws themselves, this section is called “Matters of Christian Living,” and within this section are significant statements about what we believe regarding human sexuality according to Scripture. The biblical passages to support the statements in this section are all mentioned along the way, so once you have read this chapter, you will find that we ask only some personal application questions.

Here is the Matters of Christian Living section of our bylaws as they are written verbatim:

MATTERS OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

The Christian Living subsections of these bylaws are intended to outline Harvest Bible Chapel Fresno's position on several key topics as we interpret them in view of Scripture. These sections are presented to every member and regular attender of the church and each member and regular attender may be brought into church discipline by the elders according to the pattern of Matthew 18:15-17 if they are deemed to be acting with unrepentance in any of these areas. It should be noted that any unrepentant sin may be addressed according to Matthew 18:15-17, but the matters discussed here require particular attention because (1) different churches apply these Scriptures in different ways and (2) the apostles and the early church recognized that Christian conduct in matters of sexual activity, marriage, and divorce were ways that the conduct of the church was well-differentiated from the conduct of those in the world, in the same way that we would say they reflect a marked difference today.

Sexual Conduct and Response to Sexual Misconduct

While we recognize that alternative interpretations of various biblical passages are now presented in various churches, Harvest Bible Chapel Fresno embraces the historic Christian understanding of Scripture that sexuality is a gift from God and basic to human identity as well as a matter of behavioral expression. In a single statement, *we hold that the Bible consistently teaches that the full behavioral expression of sexuality is to take place within the context of a marriage covenant between a man and a woman and that individuals should remain celibate outside the bond of heterosexual marriage.* Therefore, we seek to cultivate a community in which sexuality is embraced as God-given and good and where biblical standards of sexual behavior are upheld.

Biblical Foundations. Foundational principles from the Bible on human sexual relationships are as follows:

1. Humans, being created in the image of God, are inherently relational beings (Genesis 1:26).

2. The inherent relational nature of humankind is expressed in a variety of contexts including family, marriage, work, and for Christians, the body of Christ (Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 Corinthians 12:14).
3. Humans were created as male and female. They were expressly blessed by God to be fruitful and multiply and to exercise dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:26-28).
4. Heterosexuality is God's design for sexually intimate relationships. Sexual union between a man and a woman is only to take place within the marriage covenant (Genesis 2:18, 21-24; Hebrews 13:4).
5. Jesus reaffirms the marital covenant as existing between a man and a woman (Matthew 19:4-9).
6. The New Testament teaches that followers of Christ are to remain celibate outside the bond of marriage. In sexual union, both body and soul are deeply impacted. A person who engages in sexual unions outside the bond of marriage sins against his or her own body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:13, 18-20).
7. The sexual union between a husband and wife has been designed by God to bring them together as "one flesh," creating a solid foundation on which to build a family (Genesis 2:18-24; Ephesians 5:31).
8. In Scripture, sexual immorality is expressly forbidden, which includes but is not limited to: fornication, adultery, bisexual conduct, homosexual acts, bestiality, incest, and use of pornography (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:7-23, 20:10-21; Matthew 5:27-28; Romans 1:20-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:17-19; Colossians 3:5).

All staff, members, and regular attenders of Harvest Bible Chapel Fresno are expected to embrace their God-given sexuality and the God-ordained standards of sexual morality reflected in this statement. We believe that God offers redemption and restoration to all who confess and forsake their sin, seeking his mercy and forgiveness through Jesus Christ (Acts 3:19-21; Romans 10:9-10; 1

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Corinthians 6:9-11). Any deviation from a biblical standard of sexual morality is sin and therefore is an opportunity for repentance, grace, and redemption, so that as a community we might honor one another and glorify God.

We believe that every person must be afforded compassion, love, kindness, respect, and dignity (Mark 12:28-31; Luke 6:31). No sin, including sexual sin of any kind, should subject a sinner to hateful or harassing behavior. Such behavior or attitudes directed toward any individual are to be repudiated and are neither in accord with Scripture nor the doctrines of HBCF.

Harvest Bible Chapel Fresno staff are equipped to discuss biblical sexuality with individuals and small groups in a spirit of grace and mercy, while upholding the principles and behavior reflected in this statement.

In light of the foregoing, Harvest Bible Chapel Fresno requires that all of its applicants and employees honor the biblical standards of sexual morality as described herein and such standards shall serve as a threshold for employment by HBCF. Failure by an applicant or employee to honor the biblical standards of sexual behavior as described herein shall be grounds for denial or termination of employment.

Limitations on marriages conducted by the pastor/elders

Because of our doctrinal position on marriage as being exclusive to a male and female entering a holy covenant, no pastor or elder at Harvest Bible Chapel Fresno shall conduct a marriage ceremony between two males or two females. This restriction applies to members of our church, as well as to those outside membership who would request a wedding be performed by our pastors or elders. As an addendum to this policy, no church building owned by HBCF may be used for the purpose of a wedding between two men or two women.

Because of our belief, based on 2 Corinthians 6:14, that believers should not enter into an “unequally yoked” marriage with an unbeliever, no pastor or elder at Harvest Bible Chapel Fresno shall conduct a marriage of a believer to an unbeliever (recognizing that we

cannot always discern the absolute nature of one's belief in Christ).

Divorce and remarriage

God hates divorce. He hates it because it always involves unfaithfulness to the solemn covenant of marriage that two partners have entered into before him, and because it brings harmful consequences to those partners and their children (Malachi 2:14-16).

In Matthew 19:3-9, Christ teaches clearly that divorce is an accommodation to man's sin that violates God's original purpose for the intimate unity and permanence of the marriage bond (Genesis 2:24). He taught that God's law allowed divorce only because of "hardness of heart" (Matthew 19:8). Legal divorce was a concession for the faithful partner due to the sexual sin or abandonment by the sinning partner, so that the faithful partner was no longer bound to the marriage (Matthew 5:32, 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:12-15). Although Jesus did say that divorce is permitted in some situations, we must remember that his primary point in this discourse is to correct the Jews' idea that they could divorce one another "for any cause at all" (Matthew 19:3), and to show them the gravity of pursuing a sinful divorce. Therefore, the believer should never consider divorce except in specific circumstances (see next section), and even in those circumstances it should only be pursued reluctantly because there is no other recourse. With God's help a marriage can survive the worst sins.

The Grounds for Divorce. The only New Testament grounds for divorce are sexual sin or desertion by an unbeliever. The first is found in Jesus' use of the Greek word *porneia* (Matthew 5:32, 19:9). This is a general term that encompasses sexual sin such as adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest. When one partner violates the unity and intimacy of a marriage by sexual sin—and forsakes his or her covenant obligation—the faithful partner is placed in an extremely difficult situation. After persistent and diligent efforts to bring the sinning partner to repentance, the Bible permits release for the faithful partner from the unrepentant partner through divorce (Matthew 5:32; 1 Corinthians 7:15).

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The second reason for permitting a divorce is in cases where an unbelieving mate does not desire to live with his or her believing spouse (1 Corinthians 7:12-15). Because “God has called us to peace” (v. 15), divorce is allowed and may be preferable in such situations. When an unbeliever desires to leave, trying to keep him or her in the marriage may only create greater tension and conflict. Also, if the unbeliever leaves the marital relationship or vacates their marital responsibilities permanently but is not willing to file for divorce, perhaps because of lifestyle, irresponsibility, or to avoid monetary obligations, then the believer is in an impossible situation of having legal and moral obligations that he or she cannot fulfill. Because “the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases” (1 Corinthians 7:15) and is therefore no longer obligated to remain married, the believer may file for divorce without fearing the displeasure of God.

An additional question arises over the matter of spousal abuse. While the Bible does not address this specifically, Harvest Bible Chapel Fresno may classify substantiated physical, emotional, or mental abuse as an abdication of the spousal role in some circumstances, and thus desertion by the offending partner. Moreover, where the church leadership can intervene in protection of the harmed spouse, we would do so, recognizing that this may mean turning over the matter to law enforcement agencies with grave concern and urgency.

The Possibility of Remarriage. Remarriage is permitted for the faithful partner only when the divorce was on biblical grounds. In fact, the purpose for a biblical divorce is to make clear that the faithful partner is free to remarry, but only in the Lord (Romans 7:1-3; 1 Corinthians 7:39).

Those who divorce on any other grounds have sinned against God and their partners, and for them to marry another is an act of “adultery” (Mark 10:11-12). This is why Paul says that a believing woman who sinfully divorces should “remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband” (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). If she repents from her sin of unbiblical divorce, the true fruits of that repentance would

be to seek reconciliation with her former husband (Matthew 5:23-24). The same is true for a man who divorces unbiblically (1 Corinthians 7:11). The only occasions when such a person could remarry are when the former spouse remarries, proves to be an unbeliever, or dies, in which cases reconciliation would no longer be possible.

The Bible also gives a word of caution to anyone who is considering marriage to a divorcee. If the divorce was not on biblical grounds and there is still a responsibility to reconcile, the person who marries the divorcee is considered an adulterer (Mark 10:12).

A member or regular attender who pursues an unbiblical divorce or marriage may be disciplined by the church.

Repentance and Forgiveness. In cases where divorce took place on unbiblical grounds and the guilty partner later repents, the grace of God is operative at the point of repentance. A sign of true repentance will be a desire to implement 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, which would involve a willingness to pursue reconciliation with his or her former spouse, if that is possible. If reconciliation is not possible, however, because the former spouse is an unbeliever or is remarried, then the forgiven believer could pursue another relationship under the careful guidance and counsel of church leadership.

In cases where a believer obtained a divorce on unbiblical grounds and remarried, he or she is guilty of the sin of adultery until that sin is confessed (Mark 10:11-12). God does forgive that sin immediately when repentance takes place, and there is nothing in Scripture to indicate anything other than that. From that point on the believer should continue in his or her current marriage.

Personal Application

In the Old Testament law, God established many guidelines regarding sexual conduct, nearly all of which were specifically reiterated by the New Testament writers. In both the Old Testament and New Testament contexts, God's people stood out from the people around them because of the way they conducted themselves with regard to sexual behavior. How do you find this to be true still today as you follow Jesus in our present culture?

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Do you find it hard to have conversations in the present culture because your position on sexual morality is different from others? How can you engage unbelievers in healthy conversations about these matters? What is the gospel's role in these conversations?

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. What specific lines here encourage you to follow God's word when it comes to sexual purity?

As a husband or wife, how does the church's formal statement on sex and marriage remind you of the importance of your marriage vows?

Do you find it helpful or a hard challenge to know that the church holds a firm biblical stance on these issues?

If you have made errors in your sexual and/or marital choices in the past, how has your relationship with Christ and realizing his grace and forgiveness been significant to you?

For mutual ministry

What areas of maintaining sexual purity are hardest for you? How can the men/women in your small group help you in living in purity?

Do you struggle with consequences from past sin, including unfor-

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givenness of others or yourself, sinful mental imagery, painful relationships, or other difficulties? In what way can you turn these over to Christ today?

LESSON 12

Biblical Counseling

God not only wants to bring us to himself, he desires to make us into the image of his Son. What a difference from systems of therapy which seek to help people become an improved version of themselves.

– Ernie Baker & Jonathan Holmes

WHAT THINGS DO YOU STRUGGLE WITH IN LIFE? Because we are a gospel church, we can admit our weaknesses, failures, and yes, even sins, without fear of judgment, criticism or condemnation. In other words, we believe Romans 8:1, where we are told there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. So again, what do you struggle with? Perhaps it is anxiety or depression. Or maybe it is an illness, or disability. Maybe you are hurting from past or current abuse, or from a broken relationship. You might have rebellious children, or an unbelieving spouse. Whatever the problem or situation, one thing we can say for certain is that God knows and he cares, and because he knows and cares, there is help and hope (Hebrews 4:15-16, 1 Corinthians 10:13). Because we believe this wholeheartedly, at Harvest Fresno we employ biblical counseling when helping people address their struggles in life.

What is biblical counseling?

Biblical counseling has been called the private ministry of the word

(whereas preaching is the public ministry of the word). It is counseling that derives directly from the Bible, or indirectly through wise application of biblical principles. Biblical counseling can also be called intensive or focused discipleship. For us, it's part of regular, ongoing discipleship, because every Christian goes through different situations in their walk with Christ where they can use some help and focused attention on certain personal issues to bring about a God-glorifying outcome. In the biblical counseling process, one person helps another understand what God's word says and then helps the individual to practically apply the word of God to their life.

God: The Three-in-One Counselor

Counseling can only be called biblical when it is sourced from and is dependent on the Bible. While it is true that the Bible is not a counseling textbook, it is also true that God is the source of all wisdom and knowledge, and he has given us everything we need to live life skillfully through his word (Proverbs 1:1-9). Who better to go to for advice and help than our Creator and Lord, as evidenced in the qualities of his three persons?

God is an "ever present help in time of trouble" (Psalm 46:1), and the one from whom our help comes (Psalm 121). His name is El-Shaddai, which means "God Almighty" or "The Mighty Provider." His name is Yahweh, the God of promise and steadfast love. He is repeatedly described as the all-powerful and all-loving Creator who provides and cares for his creation.

Jesus is called the Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6). He is our great high priest, who can sympathize with our weakness (Hebrews 4:15) and the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). When Jesus left this earth, he promised to send the Holy Spirit to take his place.

The Holy Spirit is described as our "counselor," "helper," or "comforter" (John 14:16, 16:7). He was sent to indwell God's people, and to give us power from on high to accomplish God's will and his work on earth. This indwelling of the Spirit makes believers competent to counsel one another within the context of the church.

Here we counsel, encourage, teach, correct with the truth, love, and care for one another.

Why do we need counseling?

Because we are sin-stained people, we all need intervening counsel from God's word. It is not an exaggeration to say we are in constant need of help and care. We need comfort, encouragement, help, chastisement and even a good rebuke at times.

In the beginning, God created us in his likeness. But the first man and woman chose to sin. The resulting curse changed the very nature of every human being and the reality of all creation. Part of this change means that we are sinners, too. Every day we must wrestle to obey God in mind, heart, speech, and action. When we do not, we fall into sin.

In addition to the rift sin brings in our relationship with God, it can add consequences to our lives. Some of these are direct consequences, as when a thief serves time for stealing or an adulterous affair produces a broken marriage. Other consequences are less direct, as when the children of the incarcerated thief or the broken marriage must learn to live with only one parent.

Because of sin, the world does not function as God originally designed it. People do not live continuously healthy, in harmonious relationships, and in good emotional health. Instead we experience sickness, death, emotional ups and downs, despair, anxiety, quarrels, and broken relationships. This is why we need counseling. All of us.

As the ministry of the word, biblical counseling strives to bring the gospel to bear into a person's life and situation. The gospel contains the cure for sin, and it reveals needed hope for those who suffer.

The method and goal of biblical counseling

Counseling that is truly biblical is God-dependent. Even counsel from the Bible can be misguided, as the counselor may misinterpret or misapply Scripture, or not clearly understand the counselee's problem. The counselor must be a believer, indwelt by the Holy

Spirit, and yielding to the Spirit's guidance throughout the counseling process (1 Corinthians 2:11-16). He or she must also have a solid understanding of God (theology) and his word through faithful and diligent study (2 Timothy 2:15).

You can expect a biblical counselor to speak truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), bringing a blend of grace and truth into your life to provide what is needed for your good. This results in the counselor helping you make biblical changes to your thinking and life. Sometimes this counseling is private, between you and the counselor; other times one's spouse may be included, or members of your small group. In all cases, the counselor wants you to receive the best support possible, equipping you to not just hear the counsel but to enact it toward the change that is needed in your life.

The change we all need is the goal of biblical counseling: that we would glorify God by becoming more and more like Jesus individually and collectively. This process of becoming like Jesus in character is called spiritual maturity, or sanctification. It is a lifelong goal, and its target is our heart. Remember that when we receive the counsel of the word it is not so that others can change, but so we can. This can be a hard truth to submit to, for we see the sin in those who have hurt us. But with the right counsel, we can grow in the pain and even harm that comes our way.

You might recognize that while this is a spiritual goal, many practical outcomes may occur in your life as you submit to God's authority. Maybe these are changes you did not ask for up front, but God wants you to live a godly, abundant life, and when you surrender to him, he will take you to a better place in your relationship with him than you ever imagined.

What about psychology?

There are some important things to consider when comparing biblical counseling to counseling based on psychology, or what some refer to as "secular" counseling.

First, when seeking counsel from someone, you should consider the source of their counsel. No two counselors are the same and we all have personal biases and presuppositions (beliefs that

guide thinking and acting). For the biblical counselor, those personal beliefs and presuppositions come from the Bible. God's word is the final authority on any matter that it addresses. By contrast, the authority in psychological (secular) counseling lies with the individual and his or her training, not with God. The goal of secular counseling is frequently personal happiness, autonomy, and self-actualization. In secular counseling, the person seeking counseling sets the method and desired outcome of counseling. Those goals may or may not align with God's will.

This does not mean that psychology and science do not play a role or have any merit. As an example, educational psychologists use brain research to help students learn in spite of learning disabilities. We can eagerly study human behavior, the human body, and everything else in God's world, in part because it allows us to see again how awesome God's work is, but also because it may equip us to serve others (as doctors, nurses, and parents do!).

Still, everything we learn and observe must be interpreted through God's ultimate self-revelation in his Son Jesus (the living word) and Scripture (the written word). Science is subject to the imperfections of man and the slow unveiling of what God has done in his creation. But God's word is eternal and unchanging. We find timeless, and thus timely, wisdom there right now.

So, consider the source of your counsel. You must choose whom and what you want to direct your life.

The second point to consider when getting counsel is the target or goal of counseling. Psychological approaches to counseling seek to alleviate mental and emotional anguish, and to modify behavior. The psychologist will observe behavior, interpret the motives and influences of that behavior, and then take methods to help the counselee make practical changes to his or her life.

The biblical counselor will do all those things from a biblical framework and then more. God is not satisfied with mere behavioral and emotional change. God's counsel targets the heart, or the soul. According to the Bible, all our behavior, emotions, desires, and motives come from within the heart (Matthew 12:33-37, 15:18-20, Luke 6:45), which is why we are exhorted to guard our hearts with

all vigilance (Proverbs 4:23). For true and lasting change to take place, God must change our hearts by his power. Psychology can be helpful to alleviate some problems on a horizontal level, but it cannot offer help for the root of man's problem.

Finally, because psychology may help to alleviate emotional and behavioral problems, some well-meaning Christians attempt to integrate the Bible with psychology in their approach to counseling. We do not adopt this approach because many psychological theories and methods are opposed to Scripture. Any attempt to integrate the two inevitably results in a mixture of truth and error, which is not helpful or glorifying to God. Furthermore, the integrationist framework for counseling tends to lack trust in the sufficiency of God's word and an accurate theological understanding of God and man.

Biblical Counseling at Harvest Fresno

At Harvest Fresno our small group leaders are trained in the basics of biblical counseling, or soul care. The small group ministry often serves as a preventative to larger-scale problems in a believer's life. When one is actively engaged in a small group, the problems, struggles, and temptations in life can be addressed before they "explode" into personal and spiritual crises. At a very basic level, every member of a small group is actively engaged in counseling each other (Romans 15:14). When we are involved in "one-another" ministry, we can offer help to others, as well as being helped to live life well and pleasing to God.

As we've noted previously, small group leaders are equipped as shepherds to handle many of the day-to-day issues involved in counseling, and we are committed to ongoing training. These leaders help carry out the work of ministry at the direction of the elders, and they have the support of the elders in doing so. When there is a problem or an issue that the small group leader is not equipped to handle, or where they may need additional help, the elders are available and happy to assist, or to provide direction and counsel.

In addition to the small group leaders, a growing number of people in the local church are pursuing training in biblical coun-

seling. Our hope is to be further equipped as a congregation, where we have multiple certified biblical counselors among us. Some are currently pursuing certification through the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, or ACBC (biblicalcounseling.com). As the Lord provides, we have a vision to become a local training center for the ACBC to provide biblical counseling training to other local churches and to our community, as yet another avenue of making disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What about confidentiality and abuse reporting?

Confidentiality and abuse reporting are two very important issues that pertain to counseling. In many ways the practice of biblical counselors will mimic the actions that any psychologist or mental health counselor would take pertaining to these issues. There are legal and ethical guidelines to follow when a counselor is made aware of potential abuse or neglect of children and dependent adults, which we are committed to following at Harvest Fresno. God highly values the poor, needy, and the oppressed (Matthew 25:36, James 1:27, Isaiah 1:17). So do we!

All counselors value the right of confidentiality. If someone doesn't trust a counselor to keep personal information confidential, they will likely not seek help. In any counseling situation, however, there are limits to the right of confidentiality. For instance, when a person is considered to be a danger to himself or someone else, a report must be made to the governing authorities for the protection of all involved. In biblical counseling, confidentiality is maintained according to both legal and biblical mandates.

In addition to protecting someone against physical harm, biblical counselors serve to protect people from spiritual harm. Information that does not need to be shared, or which may be regarded as gossip, will not be shared. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality, because edification sometimes calls for the inclusion of another person who is positioned to bring help.

In chapter 9, we considered Matthew 18:15-17, which limits confidentiality in the church in some cases. If someone is in a counseling situation where sin is involved (as defined by the Scrip-

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tures) and the counselee remains unrepentant or needs help with accountability, someone else may be included into the circle of help. The additional person or people may be likened to a witness or an advocate to help the other obey God and avoid spiritual and other forms of harm. Ultimately, our counsel is guided and controlled by the law of love, which always seeks the good of others (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Exploring the Scriptures

List the attributes of God from the following passages:

Deuteronomy 32:3-4

Psalms 46:1

Psalms 121

John 10:11-15

Hebrews 4:15-16

How does knowing who God is bring a confidence that he can meet our deepest needs in life?

Choose one of these biblical “heroes” and read about their struggles:

Moses (Numbers 20:10-13)

Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-18)

King David (2 Samuel 11:2-12:23)

Paul (2 Corinthians 11:24-32 & 12:7-10)

What are some of the characteristics of the difficulties this person endured?

Why do you think their struggles are included in God’s word?

How does this help you in facing your problems?

What hope do you have from God when you are suffering or going

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through hardship based on the following Scriptures: Romans 8:18, 28; 1 Corinthians 10:13; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:3-9; 1 Peter 4:12-19?

What hope do you have from God's word when you are trapped in sin (Psalm 32:1-5, Proverbs 28:13, Romans 3:23-25, 1 John 1:8-9)?

Personal application

What are you struggling with right now in your life? What truths do you find in Romans 8:1, 1 Corinthians 10:13 and Hebrews 4:15-16 that help you through your problems?

What does it mean to you that God is your counselor?

Have you typically thought of counseling as something that belongs

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inside the church? Why or why not? Has this lesson changed your thinking?

THE HARVEST FRESNO LIFE

God wants his people committed to fellowship with one another in local churches. But when people come together from all walks of life, it's helpful to establish common understandings and make ongoing commitments to each other before the Lord.

Written by our elders, *INSIDE CHURCH* explains not only what we believe but how we do things at Harvest Fresno. Drawing from the Scriptures to support each topic, you'll see how much we want to function according to God's plan for the local church within the greater body of Christ.

Originally presented as a small group study for our members and regular attenders, the book is also a resource for those who are checking out what Harvest Fresno is all about, as well as for those who want to know what God says in his word about a robust fellowship of those who together believe in him and share mutual ministry in his name.

HARVEST FRESNO

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