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Small Group Message 1:

One People



How would you and I answer the question: "To what church do you belong?" "Which is your church?" I may answer the question by saying that my church is the Living Grace congregation or I may be saying that I belong to the Lutheran Church of Australia or I may identify the school chapel in South street as my place of worship. In like manner others may say: "My church is the Church of Christ or the Assemblies of God or the Anglican church, and so on."

Familiar answers. Time-honoured answers. True reflections of reality. But - let's ask a dangerous question - how does the Bible speak about the church to which people belong? Brothers and sisters in Christ, are we prepared for a challenge to our theological traditions and religious practices? Acts 8:1 and 11:22 speak about the " ... the church at Jerusalem ... ". Romans 16:1 mentions the "church in Cenchrea". 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1 - "the church of God in Corinth"; Colossians 4:16 - "the church of the Laodiceans"; 1 Thessalonians 1:1: "the church of the Thessalonians"; Revelations 2:1 - "the church of Ephesus"; Revelations 2:8 - "the church in Smyrna"; Revelations 2:12 - "the church in Pergamos"; Revelations 2:18 - "the church in Thyatira"; Revelations 3:1 - "the church in Sardis"; Revelations 3:7 - "the church in Philadelphia"; Revelations 3:14 - "the church in Laodicea".

The Bible knows of only one church in any given city or locality which means that the Bible would speak of us as "the church in Toowoomba" - would speak of you as "the church in now insert the name of your town or city". Sure enough the Scriptures know about various church assemblies all over the one city and talk about them as "churches meeting in private homes or elsewhere" (cf. Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2) - not all of us fit into the same building - but ultimately all the little house churches or other church gatherings make up "the one church in the city". Brothers and sisters in Christ, to what church do we belong? According to the Bible we belong to the church in our city.

This may come as a shock to the system. "Do you mean to say that I am in the same church as those who at worship are swinging from chandeliers? Do you seriously want me to embrace Lutherans? How can anyone singing in tongues or chanting ancient liturgies be in my church? How can that be?" However, Watchman Nee, a Chinese pastor, teaching and writing in the 1930s, he insisted: "This fact cannot be overemphasized that in Scripture no other name but the name of a locality is ever connected with a church, and division of the Church into churches is solely on the ground of difference of locality" (Watchman Nee: The Church And The Work II. Rethinking The Work; New York 1982, p88). Also: "In the New Testament there is one method and one alone for dividing the Church into churches, and that God-ordained method is division on the basis of locality" (Watchman Nee: The Church And The Work II. Rethinking The Work; New York 1982, p89). One more from Watchman Nee: "A local church is a church which comprises all the children of God in a given locality" (Watchman Nee: The Church And The Work II. Rethinking The Work; New York 1982, p110).

Our locality here is the city of Toowoomba and therefore our local church is the church in Toowoomba which is made up of all the children of God living in this city. Surrounding localities - Warwick, Dalby, Gatton - they are free to have their own churches because we just don't live together but the Christians living here, they are "the church in Toowoomba".

As I said earlier this has not been our practice. Church unity has not been our strong suit. In Toowoomba - and elsewhere - numerous churches have been trying for years and are trying now to build up relationships and trust, do things together, become one, go on prayer summits, pray together every week, organize city celebrations, and so on, but - would you agree? - we have been timid in

letting church unity affect our main business which for most of us is the hub of activity surrounding our own church building. For instance, in my case: the ministry of Living Grace, the converts of Living Grace, the growth or decline of Living Grace, the profile of Living Grace, the offering at Living Grace.

I think that it is true to say that at the moment the issue of church unity is an adjunct to our congregational agenda and has not yet made enough inroads into how we see ourselves as church members in this city. Church unity is still more or less program driven: a week of worship here, a joint city celebration there - overburdened church people just support another worthwhile cause and commit. We are not yet at the stage where church unity, the church in our city, affects our day-to-day thinking and our day-to-day doing. At least that seems to be true for most of us.

By the way what we are talking about here is not the ideal of becoming one super-congregation. That's neither practical nor efficient. This is about churches embracing each other as the one church in Toowoomba. We accept each other, love each other, practice grace, work together, hold each other accountable, combine our witness, uphold the unity of the Spirit, and in the process maybe even recognize spiritual leadership as it arises.

The challenge is whether we can undo hundreds of years of church history. Is it worth pouring energy into a cause which has been lost many times before? Why unite, only to separate again later? Save church unity for heaven but here on earth be real.

And yet, church unity is not optional. There is not much time but we briefly sketch some of the reasons why God places church unity on the top of the agenda and only works with all of his might through a united church.

Unity is a reflection of God himself. The Bible testifies in 1 John 4:16: " ... God is love ... " and therefore our one God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - constantly declare their love for each other. At Jesus' baptism God the Father spoke from heaven - Mark 1:11: " ... You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Jesus declared - John 17:10-11: "All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. ... Holy Father, ... we are one."

Jesus celebrates - John 16:14: "The Holy Spirit will bring glory to me [Jesus Christ] ..." The Spirit finally speaks to God the Father in terms of endearment - Romans 8:15: " ... Abba, Father, [dear Father]."

God is love and therefore unity is a reflection of God himself. This means in concrete terms: There is no way in the whole wide world that the children of God can possess the love of God, be in tune with the God of unity, be new creations, have the Spirit of God move in God-pleasing ways, and at the same time not reflect God in such core issues as love and unity.

Jesus prayed repeatedly - John 17:11: "Holy Father, protect my disciples ... so that they may be one as we are one"; John 17:22-23: "I have given my disciples the glory that you, [Father in heaven], gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity ..." We are to be one as God is one.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus prayed no pipe-dream which may or may not be achieved in this world, in our cities. Jesus prayed about our unity because there is no other way for us to be who we are. Listen again to Jesus' prayer: "I have given my disciples [the Christians in this city] the glory that you, [Father in heaven], gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me." If the glory of God indeed dwells among us and Jesus Christ is in us, then we cannot be anything but united. Any disunity points to a diminished presence of the glory of God and a stifling of Jesus Christ in us. Isn't it obvious? Any disunity among Christians is caused by sin. How can we be divided if our one God is not divided and dwells in us? I repeat what I said earlier: Jesus prayed about our unity because there is no other way for us to be who we are.

Jesus said: "I will be in them". Other sections of Scripture expand on what this means for you and I: Jesus in all of us creates and bestows unity among all Christians. Right at our baptism God declares - Galatians 3:27-28: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Baptism - being born anew through faith in Christ - our baptism makes us one with every other Christian to the extent that there is neither Jew nor Greek, rich nor poor, male or female, conservative or liberal, traditional or charismatic. We are all clothed in Christ living a new life where the presence of our Lord negates all human divisions and disunity. This is what we are: united, one in Christ.

Then, every time we celebrate the meal of Holy Communion the very nature of our unity is confirmed - 1 Corinthians 10:16-17: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks [- the cup of Holy Communion-] a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break [- the bread of Holy Communion-] a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."

In Holy Communion we all partake of the one Christ in the one loaf of bread and therefore we cannot be anything but united.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is strong. Both baptism and Holy Communion leave us in no doubt how serious God is about who we are: One in Christ, united, one body. Why do we dare to keep up disunity and deny God's designs?

The Bible penetrates the mystery of our unity even deeper by suggesting that we together are the body of Christ. Romans 12:5: "... in Christ we who are many form one body ..." And another reference to baptism - 1 Corinthians 12:13: "... we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body [the body of Christ, the church] ..."

All right! So far we have established who we are. Church unity is not optional because before we do or say, think or feel anything God already made us one in Christ. We have established that. Now we tease out how our unity - the church unity of all Christians - is an indispensable factor of God's work in this world.

The Bible continues with the image of the church as the body of Christ and spells out the obvious. We are one body and if parts of the one body don't function in unison with other parts, there is a breakdown in body function which stifles growth and makes the whole body suffer - 1 Corinthians 12:24-26:

"... But God has combined the members of the body ... so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it." And also Ephesians 4:15-16: "... we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body [the church], joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." As the body of Christ we do need to maintain our unity. Otherwise we cannot function.

One passage especially drives this home in mind-boggling ways - Ephesians 2:22-23: "And God placed all things under the feet of Jesus Christ and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." What an awesome mystery! The fullness of Christ - who fills everything in every way for the church - the fullness of Christ dwells in the church which is his body.

What happens now if the church decides to indulge in disunity? Brothers and sisters in Christ, are we prepared to face the answer to this question? What happens if the church decides to indulge in disunity? According to Ephesians 2 then the fullness of Christ disperses over a divided body. Disunity makes the fullness of Christ disintegrate in our midst and robs the church of its God-given power. We simply cannot afford to deny the design of God. We need to be what we are: together the body of Christ, the fullness of Christ in the one church.

If we want to see an outpouring of the Holy Spirit over many people so that an entire city bows to our Lord Jesus Christ and glorifies the name of God. If we want to see cities saved, then we have to come to grips with the fullness of Christ which only unfolds its power in the body of a united church. As churches we are so slow on the uptake but Jesus was quite clear. Listen to the mission thrust of unity in the by now familiar passages. Jesus prayed - John 17:23: "... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you [Father in heaven] sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." Likewise in John 13:34-25 Jesus said: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." By this the entire city will know that we are the disciples of Jesus Christ, if we love one another. City transformation requires church unity.

Just one example where disunity weakens our power. Let me say it in positive terms. Jesus promises in the Bible -Matthew 18:19-20: "... if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." Unity - not disunity - unity in Jesus' name releases the fullness of Christ and moves God to answer our prayers. Unity increases the strength of our prayers. We may not like it because some have their arms raised up, others shout and still others need a prayer book to pray anything. We may not like it but this is who we are: one in Christ.

[Extended version: And is it any surprise to read in Acts 2:42-47: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship ... All the believers were together and had everything in common ... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved"? Devotion to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship of Christians, being together and having everything in common ... Is it any wonder that such unity attracts people and allows Jesus to add to the number of those that make up his body here on earth - a body that functions well, cares for everyone and thrives on the fullness of Christ?]

Unity is not optional. However, by now I'm sure a big "but" has formed in the minds of our church upbringing. What about doctrinal boundaries between Christians? For instance, can a Lutheran worship with someone that denies infant baptism and insists on full immersion? Can a charismatic worship with someone who believes that the miraculous workings of the Holy Spirit have ended with the age of the apostles? Christians in this world subdivided themselves into about 33,800 denominations just so that the doctrinal boundaries between Christian groupings can be maintained. Surely what so many of us are doing must be wise. I'm afraid that church unity keeps stumbling over the doctrinal hurdle.

And yet, church unity is still not optional. Christians cannot withhold fellowship from each other because of doctrinal squabbles. The Bible says - Romans 8:9: " ... if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." But if someone has the Spirit of Christ and proclaims with 1 Corinthians 12:3: "Jesus is Lord", then he is also part of the body of Christ, clothed with Christ in his baptism, sharing with us the body of our Lord in the meal of Holy Communion, one with us.

Did we ever notice that the key passage of Ephesians 4:3-6 - I read: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" - did we ever notice that this key passage fails to mention the "one textbook of denominational doctrines"? In fact the same Ephesians passage makes quite clear in verse 13 that it is the unity of the Spirit that allows doctrinal maturity and unity in faith and knowledge to develop: " ... be patient, bearing with one another in love ... keep the unity of the Spirit ... to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it ... so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God ..." (verses 1-13). Doctrinal maturity grows out of unity and is not a precondition for it.

When did we ever come up with the idea that we can do the opposite from Jesus? He makes fellow believers members of his church body but we deny them fellowship. How can we deny fellowship to Christ himself who makes his home even in our strangest fellow believers?

The big worry or course is the question of truth. Conventional wisdom demands that we need to remain separate so that we can safeguard the truth. O we of little faith! The truth of God is safe even without our safekeeping. It is the Holy Spirit who is in charge of God's truth. Jesus said - John 14:16-17: " . I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth." And also John 15:26: " ... the Spirit of truth .. will testify about me." Finally John 16:13 - Jesus said: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we may attempt to safeguard the truth on our own in 33,800 different denominations. But we are wrong. The truth of God belongs to the domain of the Holy Spirit, therefore cannot be lost, and most importantly is not to be had apart from church unity.

We revisit what we have said earlier. Ephesians 2:22-23: " ... the church, which is Jesus Christ's body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." This means: The church, Christ's body, needs to remain united for the fullness of Christ to unfold the fullness of God's truth among us. And isn't that our current experience? None of us has a monopoly on the truth. Some are so strong in their preaching of God's grace that they don't speak enough about doing what God commands. Others are so strong in preaching sacrifice and discipleship that they don't say enough about the free gift of salvation. Some focus on right teaching but not on praying. Others pray all the time but don't gain in knowledge. All of us - can we examine our hearts? - safeguarding one bit of the truth we develop blind spots somewhere else. The truth of God is not to be had apart from church unity.

To repeat another Bible passage from before - Ephesians 4:1-13: " ... to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it ..." To each one of us grace has been given which means that each member of Christ's body the church is important and shares knowledge of God.

There is more and this may even scare us. This may lead to repentance. Christians separated in about 33,800 different denominations better understand that according to the Bible love - not textbook learning - love is the key to the knowledge of God. We heard earlier how Jesus prayed and his prayer already pointed to the truth. Jesus prayed - John 17:23: " ... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you [Father in heaven] sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." Likewise in John 13:34-25 Jesus said: " ... By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." People know God as they perceive love and unity.

The same truth is spelled out even clearer in Colossians 2:2-5: "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ ..." And also 1 John 4:7-8: " ... let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God."

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. Isn't that frightening? Doctrinal disputes deteriorate very quickly into proud contests. But now God tells us that there is no knowledge of him without love. Love each other, be what you are: the body of Christ in the one church - love each other and then know God.

I come to a close. Brothers and sisters in Christ, next time we are asked: "To what church do you belong", we may answer: "The one church in our city, the body of Christ, the fullness of him." We love each other. We belong to each other so much that church unity becomes central to our understanding of who we are in Christ.

Reveal centres and fellowships, Salvation Army, Church of Christ, AOG, Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, Uniting, independent, Pentecostal, ... - all of us! - we belong to the one church in our city. What does that mean for the way we do business at our individual church plants? What does that mean for the way we seek city transformation? Let's give that some more over these 40 days. Amen.



One Message

There is no use denying that we Christians fail to agree on a whole range of issues. Do we baptize infants or adults, dip or dunk? Do we worship with quiet reverence or bang the drums? Do we recognize the pope or don't we? And so on. The range of controversial issues is almost boundless but brothers and sisters in Christ, we are nevertheless one in Christ and remain so, and most importantly our message is also one and remains so despite these wide-ranging controversies.

The early Christians were like us: at each other's throat over many issues. Did non-Jewish converts need to have their foreskins cut off in agreement with some Bible stipulations? Some Christians said "yes". They made the ruling that all non-Jews coming to faith needed to be circumcised. Paul, however, the former persecutor of the church, he disagreed. That was as serious a debate as modern debates on baptism.

I give you just one more example. In some early Christian congregations people argued over buying and eating meat that was previously offered up to idols. Some thought that this practise would amount to idol worship. Others did not burden their consciences. Paul taught the following - 1 Corinthians 8:4-8: "So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one ... food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do."

However, was Paul right? Those who rejected meat that was previously offered up to idols at pagan temples had a good case. Paul himself did not deny the spiritual presence of demonic heathen forces (1 Corinthians 8:5; Romans 8:38-39) and therefore idols had to be taken seriously. Paul's logic was ambiguous to some. On the one hand idol meat was deemed harmless but on the other hand Paul himself warned about eating the same meat while it was still in the pagan temples.

He wrote - 1 Corinthians 10:14-22: "Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry ... Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons ... " (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:10). Food sacrifices to demons, idolatry, Christians in heathen temples: That was a serious theological conflict

The early Christians were like us: at each other's throat over many issues. However, most of the time the admonition was - and this is the apostle Paul writing to early Christians - Romans 14:1: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters." Romans 14:4: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? ... " Romans 14:13: "Let us stop passing judgement on one another ... " The apostle Paul was adamant that despite disagreements Christians were nevertheless one and remained so, and that their message also survived conflicts and remained one.

Only once Paul drew a line in the sand and charged that some Christians were no longer Christians because they believed perverted doctrines. Galatians 1:6-9: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned." "Let him be condemned." Strong words. What was happening here? And what can we learn from that for ourselves? The apostle Paul continued to write to the same people and explained what he meant - Galatians 2:21-3:2: "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing ... Did you receive the Holy Spirit by observing the law or by believing what you have heard?"

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit by observing the law or by believing what you have heard?" That's what it was about! The apostle Paul was anxious to contrast the way of the Law with the way of receiving by faith, the way of grace, the way of the Gospel. The Law - the way of the Law, observing the Law - neither gains righteousness nor the Holy Spirit. The apostle asked his congregation - Galatians 3:3: " ... After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

Paul spelled out our common core teaching - the all important relationship between faith and works, grace and law - in Ephesians 2:8-10. He said: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we may disagree on many issues but not on this one. This is where our message must be the same.

Let's unpack this further with a number of theses.

Thesis 1: God speaks to people either Law or Gospel. These two ways of divine speaking need to be distinguished but belong together and work together dynamically.

When God speaks Law, he asks us to do something. For instance, he says: "Do not commit adultery. Keep the sabbath day holy. Love God with all of your heart, mind and soul. Love your neighbour as yourself." When God speaks Law, he says: "Do this and do that."

When God speaks Gospel, he doesn't ask us to do anything but proclaims what he is doing himself. For instance, he says: "I forgive you. I love you. I pour out my Holy Spirit on you. I convict you of your sin and save you." When God speaks Gospel, which is Good News, he says: "I do this and I do that - for you." In summary: We do the Law and God does the Gospel.

Thesis 2: The Law always ends up accusing us.

When God speaks Law and says: "Do this and do that," what is our response? Let's just consider one commandment - Ephesians 4:3: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit." In this instance, do we agree with God's Law? Do we think that God is serious about his Law? Do we want to obey the Law? Yes! And yet, how does this commandment make us feel? "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit. Make every effort. Make every effort to keep unity." Brothers and sisters in Christ, if you are like me, you begin to feel uncomfortable. Have we obeyed this Law? No! I may get jealous of my colleagues. I may get upset because another pastor is pushing too hard for change and I don't even share the vision. Maybe I don't feel honoured enough. And so on.

Why do we not obey even the best of laws? Because this side of eternity - forgiven and holy as we are - we are also sinners. We keep falling into sin. The Bible says - 1 John 1:8: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Therefore, every law sooner or later ends up accusing us. The Law says: "Do this and do that," but - imperfect as we are - we fail to live up to its perfect standards. We sin and stand accused.

Thesis 3: The Law is preached first to accuse of sin, then the Gospel absolves and comforts.

God uses the Law to accuse us, to reveal his wrath, to rebuke sin, to terrify our consciences, to confront us with holiness, to strip away all self-righteousness - and all of that is good because "only the sick know that they need a doctor". The Law makes us aware that we are sick with sin. So the Law makes us ready to take the medicine of the Gospel - free forgiveness, freedom through the blood of Christ shed for us on a cross.

Thesis 4: The Law is not preached to those that are already terrorized by the Law. They need to hear the Gospel.

At one time Peter reluctantly followed Jesus' command to fish when he - a fisherman himself - had given up all hope. His heart was not in doing what Jesus said - because: wasn't Jesus just a carpenter? - but later when Peter saw his fishing nets breaking with the catch that was delivered by Jesus' awesome divine authority, he reacted. I read from Luke 5:8: "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; for I am a sinful man!'"

Peter was on his knees crying out in desperation: "Go away, Lord. I am a sinner. Go away. I am unclean and God is a consuming fire. Woe to me." As Peter was on his knees crying in such desperation, Jesus did not make his misery worse pushing him over the edge into the arms of Satan. Jesus did not speak more Law but Gospel. He said: "Don't be afraid, Peter. Don't be afraid. I will make all things well. From now on you will catch people."

We do the same as Jesus. People that are convicted of sin do not need more Law preaching. They need to be comforted with the Gospel of forgiveness.

Thesis 5: The Gospel is not preached to those that are no longer bothered by their sins. They need to hear the Law.

Once Christians become self-satisfied and smug, once Christians lose passion for God because everything in the present is just fine - after all are we not "justified by faith through grace apart from works", "apart from works": so relax - once Christians become comfortable in such a way, we can no longer preach the Gospel but need to preach the Law.

In 1937 the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer did just that and wrote some stirring words. He said: "We Christians [original: Lutherans] have gathered like eagles round the carcass of cheap grace, and there we have drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ ... Cheap grace has turned out to

be utterly merciless to our Evangelical Church ... Instead of opening up the way to Christ it has closed it. Instead of calling us to follow Christ, it has hardened us in our disobedience ... The word of cheap grace has been the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works ... "

Bonhoeffer attacked the preaching of "cheap grace" which is precisely the preaching of more grace to those that are no longer bothered by their sins. Bonhoeffer says: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

To say it in other words: Cheap grace is grace without following Jesus as our Lord. That cannot be. If we ever think along those lines, we don't need more Gospel preaching but the Law.

Thesis 6: The Law does not produce good works.

This is important. The Law does not motivate good works. It may be very tempting especially for church leaders to whip the church into action with appeals to the Law: "Come on, Church. We ought. We should. We must. Christians are commanded to pray. So pray. Christians are commanded to forgive each other. So you must forgive. And so on."

What does that kind of preaching end up doing? Accusing us! The Law always ends up accusing us. "You poor miserable sinners may be striving but you are still not doing as you ought."

In response to that we only have three options. 1) Either we rebel against the Law and fall away from God 2) or we fall into despair wringing our hands in hopelessness 3) or we lie to ourselves becoming hypocrites who think that they are actually quite successful following the Law. None of these three options is a good option. The Law by itself is a cold and cruel task-master which makes us resent God for demanding the impossible - be as righteous as God! - driving us on out of a sense of duty and despair and - eventually making us avoid reality, even tempting us with pride as we make the most of our little achievements. "See God, what I did for you?" No! The Law does not produce good works.

Thesis 7: The Gospel produces good works.

Only the Gospel motivates with love and kindness, empowers through the Holy Spirit and therefore works a response which is free of selfish ambitions. We obey the Law because the love of God so totally overpowers us that we become pure ourselves walking in his steps.

I quote Martin Luther on how the supernatural gift of faith produces good works. He said: "Faith is a work of God in us, which changes us and brings us to birth anew from God (cf. John 1). It kills the old Adam, makes us completely different people in heart, mind, senses, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. What a living, creative, active, powerful thing is faith! It is impossible that faith ever stop doing good. Faith doesn't ask whether good works are to be done, but, before it is asked, it has done them. It is always active. Whoever doesn't do such works is without faith; ... Faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace; it is so certain that someone would die a thousand times for it. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace. It is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire" (Preface to the Letter of Romans).

Yes, "it is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire" because faith comes from God - a gift of grace/pure Gospel - faith comes from God and thus expresses the nature of God also in works. Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is the Gospel that motivates good works.

Thesis 8: The Gospel produces good works and makes us wage "war" against our old sinful self.

This thesis may help us to avoid any misconceptions. It is the Gospel - the kindness of God, the power of God - that produces good works but we are still involved in an active even strenuous way. With your permission I quote Luther again: "For the inner self, being conformed to God and created after the image of God through faith, rejoices and delights itself in Christ, in whom such blessings have been conferred on it, and hence has only this task before it: to serve God with joy and for nothing in free love. But in doing this he comes into collision with that contrary will in his own flesh, which is striving to serve the world and to seek its own gratification. This the spirit of faith cannot and will not bear, but applies itself with cheerfulness and zeal to keep it down and restrain it, as Paul says, 'I delight in the law of God after the inward self, but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin' (Romans 7:22-23), and again, 'I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a

castaway' (1 Corinthians 9:27), and 'They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affectations and lusts' (Galatians 5:24)."

The Gospel makes us come into collision with that contrary will in our sinful self that wants to serve anybody but God. The Gospel makes us come into collision with sin, empowers us to do battle with sin and makes us victorious "having crucified the flesh with its affectations and lusts." It is the Gospel that produces good works but not in such a way as to make spiritual warfare redundant.

[Extended version: At this point of time maybe we need to clarify this further. How do we preach on discipleship? How do we preach obedience and do so not motivating with the Law but the Gospel?

An evangelist complains: " ... what is particularly saddening and even agonizing, is that many ministers and leading Christians give completely false instruction on how to overcome sin, [how to become obedient]. The directions that are generally given on the subject, I am sorry to say, amount to this: 'Take your sins in detail, resolve to abstain from them, and fight against them, if need be with prayer and fasting, until you have overcome them. Set your will firmly against a relapse into sin, pray and struggle, and resolve that you will not fall - and persist in this until you form the habit of obedience and break all your sinful habits.' To be sure, it is generally added: 'In this conflict, you must not depend upon your own strength but pray for the help of God.' ... " (Charles Finney: Power From God, New Kensington 1996, 119-120).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what's wrong with that? What's wrong with taking your sins in detail, resolving to abstain from them and fighting against them? That is motivating with the Law. "Do this and do that! Overcome with a habit of obedience!" It doesn't work. Sin is like darkness which can only be overcome by light. We don't get rid of darkness in a room by trying to shovel out the darkness. We have to turn on the light. In the same way, resolutions and battle plans, even the best instructions based on the Law of God, they fasten our attention on the sin and its source, when we need to fasten on to Jesus - the only light that can dispel our darkness. The power for victory comes from the Gospel. The power for new life comes from the grace of God.

However, having said that, there can be another problem. If the Gospel produces good works and therefore we preach the grace of God, the actions of God, to motivate people's obedience to God, do we not once again end up with "cheap grace"?

Bonhoeffer tells the story of a pastor who was met by a parishioner after church. The parishioner said: "Pastor, just lately I don't seem to get anything out of your sermons. They don't speak to me any more." The pastor counseled: "Just hang in there. The Bible promises that the word of God creates faith. God ministers to you." However, a few Sundays later the parishioner came back with the same complaint which left the pastor confused about what to say next.

The pastor was confused because he tried to motivate with the Gospel and therefore kept saying: "God loves you. You are a forgiven child of God. He speaks to you in sermons and wants to bless you. Good things happen as you listen. God promises to you. God ministers to you." The pastor kept on going like this but it didn't work. It became "cheap grace". What then was he to do? Motivate with the Law instead? No, listen to what Bonhoeffer suggests: "That particular pastor should stop agonizing over this. He needs to spell out what he knows about the parishioner: 'You are trying to keep some part of your life under your own control. That is what is preventing you from listening to Christ and believing in his grace. You cannot hear Christ because you are willfully disobedient. Somewhere in your heart you are refusing to listen to his call.' ... "

Bonhoeffer explains in general terms: "No one should be surprised at the difficulty of faith, if there is some part of his life where he is consciously resisting or disobeying the commandment of Jesus ... Is there some part of your life which you are refusing to surrender at his behest, some sinful passion, maybe, or some animosity, some hope, perhaps your ambition or your reason? If so, you must not be surprised that you have not received the Holy Spirit, that prayer is difficult, or that your request for faith remains unanswered ... How can you hope to enter into communion with him when at some point in your life you are running away from him?"

Therefore the pastor's message to the struggling parishioner was to be: "Dear friend, unless you obey, you cannot believe. Unless you repent and obey, no sermon will speak to you because you are running away from Christ."

Bonhoeffer recognized that in this instance and other instances you can no longer speak Gospel but need to speak Law. He followed Thesis 5: "The Gospel is not preached to those that are no longer bothered by their sins. They need to hear the Law." However, - let's work hard on understanding this - that does not mean that Bonhoeffer in this case counseled to motivate good works by Law. The dynamic is that the Law needed to accuse again, so that the hardened parishioner reawakened to his need for salvation - confronted with the Law become aware of his sickness with sin, overcome the lie

that God is not serious about his Law, that his wrath does not burn against all unrighteousness - the Law needed to accuse again, so that the hardened parishioner reawakened to his need for salvation which then would drive him to seek and find healing in the Gospel - the source for all of his good works.

Let's get at this from a different angle. A Christian counselor writes: "Life in the Spirit is easy. For that is the hallmark of the kingdom - no sweat ... If we have to try to be loving, that is evidence that we are serving not God but the idol of our . [sinful self]. If kindness, love and forgiveness flow from us easily and naturally, all credit goes swiftly and easily to the Lord, for His life is in us. So the presence of striving is always our first clue ... [for something being wrong]" (John & Paula Sandford: Restoring The Christian Family, New Jersey 1979).

This reaffirms what we have said so far. "Life in the Spirit is easy [that is: Life motivated by the Gospel of God is easy because then the grace of God motivates and empowers everything we do.] . that is the hallmark of the kingdom - no sweat ... If we have to try to be loving, that is evidence that we are serving not God but the idol of our . [sinful self]."

If we have to try to be loving, then we are motivated not by the Gospel but Law, relying on ourselves to do what the Law says. On the other hand, motivated by the Gospel, having a life in the Spirit, we don't have to try doing God's will, we just do - easily and naturally without raising a sweat.

In summary this is how we preach on discipleship: 1. We let the Law of God accuse us of sin. 2. We surrender to God and repent of our sin. 3. We receive forgiveness which removes any blockages to the power of the Gospel. 4. Good works flow from the grace of God within us. 5. As often as we struggle with good works, we go back to point 1.]

Thesis 9: One and the same Word can function either as Law or Gospel.

We speed up a little. One and the same message from God can function either as Law or Gospel. For instance, the message of Jesus' death and resurrection can function either as Law or Gospel. Law: You and your sins crucified Christ and you should not have done it. Gospel: Through his death and resurrection Christ forgives you and takes away your sins. Another example. The message of godly prayer can function as either Law or Gospel. Law: You should pray, but you do not pray enough. Gospel: God speaks, listens and comforts you in prayer. You and I, we may be aware of how we speak the message of God. There is a Law and a Gospel way of speaking the truth and we need to know what we are saying.

Thesis 10: The most difficult and highest Christian art is to master the dynamic of Law and Gospel, to distinguish these two ways of divine speaking, and to know when to speak either Law or Gospel.

The teaching of how to distinguish Law and Gospel may be easy to understand, but it is most difficult to put into practice. The Holy Spirit must teach this in the school of experience. Another quote from Martin Luther: "There is no person on earth who knows how properly to distinguish Law from the Gospel. When we hear about it in a sermon, we imagine that we know how to do it, but we are greatly mistaken. The Holy Spirit alone knows this art ..."

What Luther means is this. Thesis 4 says: "The Law is not preached to those that are already terrorized by the Law. They need to hear the Gospel." And Thesis 5 says: "The Gospel is not preached to those that are no longer bothered by their sins. They need to hear the Law." How do you know whether the person in front of you is terrorized by the Law and needs to hear the Gospel, or whether the person in front of you is no longer bothered by their sins and therefore needs to hear the Law?

When do you speak Law and Gospel? Should you challenge someone over a marriage breakup, accuse with the Law, or do you need to speak words of comfort in a hellish situation? It depends, doesn't it? Someone that has become hardened in their attitudes saying: "I don't do anything wrong. God meant for me to run off with my secretary. It feels so right" That person needs to hear the Law, the truth about sin. But another person needs comfort. Another person may say: "Why do I bother? I'm the worst piece of moral junk in this church. God must hate me and I don't blame him." That person needs to hear Gospel. Encouragement from God: "God loves you and he will not abandon you. He heals the broken-hearted. God can bring healing into your relationships."

Hardly anyone gets this right. No pastor, no church, no denomination gets the message of God right all of the time. You can have a church that is very proud of its doctrines - brilliant understanding of the Holy Trinity, the works of the Holy Spirit, the office of the ministry, good works, the lot - and yet, it can be a church that never speaks the truth to people because it always speaks Law when it should speak Gospel and always speaks Gospel when it should speak Law.

The Holy Spirit needs to reveal to us what is on the hearts of people so that we know what to speak - Law or Gospel. The Holy Spirit needs to teach us in the school of experience. You cannot learn this at Seminary.

What about our own lives? Can we at least apply Law and Gospel adequately to ourselves? No, that's just as hard. We are great at denials and self-deception and - it may come as a surprise - just as great in resisting grace. We repent and confess our sins, and then we do know with our minds that we are forgiven - free from sin, death and the devil - but how often do our hearts remain unconvinced? One of the church fathers says: "In your tribulations you will become aware that the Gospel is a rare guest in people's consciences, while the Law is their daily and familiar companion. For people have by nature the knowledge of the Law" (Martin Luther). Grace seems unnatural and we struggle with the idea that God is passionate about us loving us beyond measure, ... It's true: "The Gospel is a rare guest when our sins make us squirm with condemnation."

Thesis 11: Good Theology: Make God the doer of the sentence. God does for us and to us.

a) On our own we cannot do anything but God has to convict us of our sin and work salvation. b) When God is the doer of the sentence, we safeguard against making faith and the works of faith a human work. c) When God is the doer of the sentence, we stop accusing people with the Law. d) When God is the doer of the sentence, we hear the sweet words of the Gospel and experience the goodness of God.

I come to a close. Here are once again the eleven theses:

Thesis 1: God speaks to people either Law or Gospel. These two ways of divine speaking need to be distinguished but belong together and work together dynamically.

Thesis 2: The Law always ends up accusing us.

Thesis 3: The Law is preached first to accuse of sin, then the Gospel absolves and comforts.

Thesis 4: The Law is not preached to those that are already terrorized by the Law. They need to hear the Gospel.

Thesis 5: The Gospel is not preached to those that are no longer bothered by their sins. They need to hear the Law.

Thesis 6: The Law does not produce good works.

Thesis 7: The Gospel produces good works.

Thesis 8: The Gospel produces good works and makes us wage "war" against our old sinful self.

Thesis 9: One and the same Word can function either as Law or Gospel.

Thesis 10: The most difficult and highest Christian art is to master the dynamic of Law and Gospel, to distinguish these two ways of divine speaking, and to know when to speak either Law or Gospel.

Thesis 11: Good Theology: Make God the doer of the sentence. God does for us and to us.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, despite a whole range of controversial issues we are one and remain one with each other. We all speak Law and Gospel in such a way that we agree with the common core teaching of the Bible - the all important relationship between faith and works, grace and law. God says in Ephesians 2:8-10: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." At its core our message is one. Amen.



One At The Cross

Churches in our cities are coming together. More and more Christians are beginning to embrace each other which begs the question: Is that always comfortable? What do we think? Brothers and sisters in Christ, deep down, in the recesses of my heart, something within me says, something within you may say: "Praying with other Christian leaders feels fine but becoming one city-wide ministry team is another matter. Embracing these same leaders on my patch in my local congregation intrudes on my personal space. Maybe my members leave my church for a better, perhaps more gifted, pastor. And if that doesn't happen, what if they pick up strange ideas? What if our congregation suffers diminished growth because of city-wide distractions?"

Friends, is that what we think? Is that what we fear? Despite Jesus' prayer: " ... may they be brought to complete unity" (John 17:23) do we prefer to keep our distance from each other? The answer to that question is: "Yes! Yes, we want unity but not one that is too close." Deep down that's the truth. This is a time for honesty. Jesus prayed: " ... may they be one as we are one" (John 17:11). Therefore, according to Jesus our unity is to reflect the perfect intimacy of love and perfect synergy of labour enjoyed by God the Father and God the Son. But seasoned church people as we are - not wanting to ignore a praying Jesus - let's be wise for a moment. God is God and humans are humans. Here on earth how often does a cry for unity end up becoming the tyranny of one? As more and more people congregate the human herd instinct poses an ever present danger. What if false teaching gains a foothold or mass hysteria or whatever else the devil may come up with? As seasoned church people let's be wise and responsible here. We are all for church unity as long as we leave each other alone - at least in the everyday running of our congregations.

Nothing wrong with being wise and responsible except that Tommy Tenney writes in his book on church unity: "The issue is never the issue. The issue is always control ... The struggle for control destroys any hope of unity among us" (Tommy Tenney: God's Dream Team, Ventura 1999, p37). Maybe Tommy Tenney overstates his case - there are humble people who hesitate with integrity - but for the purposes of this talk we uphold the challenge: "The issue is never the issue. The issue is always control." Our fears, our concerned wisdom, our responsible sidestepping of the Scriptures, maybe there is even anger - all of that can be rationalized and couched in respectable language but the issues we throw up against further expressions of our unity in Christ, against giving our unity more shape, these issues are not the issues. The issue is always control which brings us to the main point of this talk: The cross alone makes us one.

Listen to the Word of God - 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5. The apostle Paul writes: "For Christ ... sent me ... to preach the gospel - not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles ... God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him ... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified ..."

What's happening here? Why would Paul insist on knowing nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified? Why wouldn't he preach Jesus Christ and him risen from the dead, ascended to heaven, reigning in glory, triumphant over the devil? Why insist on the message of the cross and why say: " ... the message of the cross ... is the power of God ..." And what has that to do with church unity, the Christians in our city?

Remember what Tommy Tenney said: "The issue is never the issue. The issue is always control." The apostle Paul knew from experience that humans - even fervent believers - are addicted to control and therefore need the cross of Christ to be confronted by the absurd foolishness of God which proclaims a dying Saviour. That God would save the world by sending his Son to die under torture leaves us speechless and helpless and clueless - as Paul said: "Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" - and at last the penny drops: We are not in control.

This is how it happened to the apostle Paul himself - Philippians 3:4-6. He writes: " ... If any other person thinks he has reason for confidence in human nature, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel [God's chosen people], of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless."

Paul was a hard-working clergy with impeccable credentials. He had reason to say: "As to righteousness under the law blameless." He denied himself, resisted temptations and kept the commandments. But then the crucified and risen Christ appeared to him in a vision and therefore he continues writing - Philippians 3:7-11: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." The cross of Christ confounded everything that Paul thought he knew, that is: belong to the people of God, be circumcised, we may say: be baptized, be zealous, be blameless, strive and do well, and then you do right in your faith. No! Wrong person in control! Confronted with the cross, whatever gain he had, Paul now counted as loss for the sake of Christ. He realized: Even the most zealous law-keeping achieved nothing. Spiritual advancement, rising influence, passionate discipleship, tireless striving for city transformation ... achieved nothing but made him have a righteousness of his own. Wrong person in control.

Jesus was crucified. Jesus saved the world not by doing but dying. As God created the world out of nothing, so he saved the world out of nothing - from the lifeless body of his crucified Son. What other choice did Paul have but get in on God's act and become nothing himself? He speaks strong words. He says: "I now suffer the loss of all things and count them as refuse. I want to share in Christ's suffering, becoming like him in his death, so that I may also gain the power of his resurrection [so that God may also create me out of nothing for the sake of Jesus]."

Do we understand the radical nature of this message? The cross strips away everything that we hold dear. All human deeds, dreams and desires, even the most noble aspirations of clergy, need to die on the cross. Paul - from the chosen people of God, circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, zealous, as to righteousness under the law blameless - that man needed to die. God has a strange way of wresting control from us. But that is the way of salvation. Hear it again. Now a new Paul seeks to share in the sufferings of Christ and even desires a death like his.

Is he mad? Would you and I go that far? Do we really understand the radical nature of this passage? The foolish secret of resurrection power?

The apostle Paul again - Philippians 2:5-11: " ... Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness ... humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place ... that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord ... "

Being in very nature God by right Jesus Christ merited divine privileges such as being served by angels, but he gave them up - all of them. Jesus Christ humbled himself. Jesus Christ chose the cross and the cross stripped him of everything, even his understanding of the Father in heaven when he cried: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matthew 27:46). And yet, precisely when nothing makes sense any more, when all human attempts have run their course, when everything seems lost, God works his power. Through the cross! That's his way! He exalted the crucified Christ to the highest place and made him Lord of you and I.

That's offensive and you and I: don't think for a moment that we are ready to submit to this message. David Orton, a fellow Australian, writes in his book *Snakes In The Temple*: "A virus has invaded the body of Christ - and, it's systemic. It infects the whole Christian community - pastors, congregations, denominations and para-church ministries. It is the twin virus of performance and power. And, we've contracted it from the surrounding culture. In a goal-orientated, task driven Western world we are programmed from childhood to kick goals - to achieve for reward and approval. Consequently, productivity and performance determine self-worth. Therefore achieving goals - increased attendance, more 'tithing units', more church plants, more conversions, more healings, more product sold, more staff and more money all feed our sense of value. The route to power in the corporate world is determined by achieving a set of performance criteria. Consequently, with the contemporary corporatisation of the church, all its activity is geared toward performance" (David Orton: *Snakes In The Temple*, Kent 2004, 34).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, are we sick with the twin virus of performance and power? Hear another quote which cuts close to the bone of clergy: "If there were an office of leadership in the New Testament, it would be that of plural eldership ... The New Testament knows nothing of a local church position that looks anything like the current role of pastor or senior pastor" (David Orton: *Snakes In The Temple*, Kent 2004, 135-136). "Does Christ really have the first place in the leadership of the church? In sentiment, yes. But in reality, no - ... [we do]. We have usurped Christ's position as head of the church ...

Human control, exercised by [the spirit of 'wanting to be first among leaders' 3 John 9], that spirit has severed us from the central nervous system of the Spirit ... whenever positions of official power exist, the fallen state of human nature, to whatever degree, will find it difficult to resist. Where there is a lack of anointing to fill the office, seduction and manipulation operate to both obtain and maintain a position. Spiritual gifting is self-evident and will make a way in the hearts of God's people. But where a leader without the anointing aspires to an office, self-promotion and manipulation are inevitable. And if the more subtle arts of flattery and innuendo do not work ... one resorts to slander and the use of naked power With the rise of one leader over the others ... [the church is cut off from the head of the body, Christ Himself]" (David Orton: Snakes In The Temple, Kent 2004, 133).

Are we cut off from Christ? Are we sick with the twin virus of performance and power? Does our leadership structure serve official power rather than Spirit power, a righteousness of our own rather than the righteousness from God that depends on faith? Do we really follow the one who made himself nothing, humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross? Probing questions. Offending questions. Nevertheless - could it be that Tommy Tenney is right - at least more often than we care to admit: "The issue is never the issue. The issue is always control"?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the apostle Paul dealt with people like us. The church in ancient Corinth was on fire with performance and power. Much speaking in tongues, prophecies, knowledge, strong faith and sacrifices. Things were so good that these super-charged Christians looked down upon the church founder Paul who no longer cut it. Some said - 2 Corinthians 10:10: " ... in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." But Paul responded - 1 Corinthians 13:1-3: "[Look,] if I speak in the tongues ... of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. [If I am a model Lutheran, model Anglican, model Pentecostal, and do everything by the book but have not love, I am nothing.] If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." The apostle Paul clarified: **Performance and power without love amount to nothing, gain nothing and make us nothing. - And we thought it made us something.**

Didn't Paul tell them - 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5? I read the passage again: " . Christ ... sent me ... to preach the gospel - not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles ... God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him ... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified ... "

Do we hear? The message of the cross sounds foolish to performance and power people but it is the power of God which chooses the foolish things of the world precisely to shame the wise, chooses the weak things of the world precisely to shame the strong, chooses the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - precisely to nullify the things that are. The cross is aggressive and - we better watch out - nullifies us. We think that we cannot exist without the power tools of city transformation, purified doctrines, charismatic giftings but Jesus saved the world not by doing but dying. God created the world out of nothing. He saved the world out of nothing - from the lifeless body of his crucified Son. Therefore, what other choice do we have but become nothing ourselves - nullified, stripped of any control, wisdom and power? As Paul writes: " ... so that no one may boast before him."

And before anyone misunderstands the cross cannot be misappropriated and turned into a theology. The cross does not remain theory, useful insight, but God practises the cross on us. Martin Luther said: "This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the Apostle calls 'enemies of the cross' [Phil 3:18],

[extended version: for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore]

the friends of the cross say the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are dethroned and the [old sinful self], who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's" (quoted in Gerhard Forde: *On Being A Theologian Of The Cross*, Grand Rapids 1997, 82).

How true. "It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil [-the cross-] until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's." Brothers and sisters in Christ, God does use suffering to deflate and destroy even our good works, even our best works, until we know that we are worthless and that whatever we do with church unity and city transformation is birthed from God and not us. Watchman Nee said: "The Cross is more than a doctrine; it must be put into practice ... We must be stricken again and again ... until we are surrendered and proud no more" (Watchman Nee: *The Release Of The Spirit*, Cloverdale 1965, 64).

And let's not think that we can work out the logic of it all. The cross keeps confounding and confronting, shaming and nullifying us. Martin Luther again: "Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend. It must transcend all comprehension ... Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge ... Behold, that is the way of the cross ... [God says:] ... it is not you, no human, no living creature, but I myself, who instruct you by my word and Spirit in the way you should go. Not the work which you choose, not the suffering you devise, but the road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire - that is the road you must take ... " (quoted in Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *The Cost Of Discipleship*, London 1959, 82-83). Bewilderment is the true comprehension. God's road is the road which is clean contrary to all that we choose or contrive or desire.

The issue is control. Friends, are we prepared to go clean contrary to all that we know about doing church? What about senior pastors? What about self-sufficient churches? What has to die for us to enjoy perfect intimacy of love and perfect synergy of labour? Let's not be like Paul's people in Corinth. They emptied the cross of its power, preferred human wisdom rather than God's foolishness, human strength rather than God's weakness, and therefore suffered the consequences, that is: a divided church. Paul writes to them: "I appeal to you . in the name of our Lord Jesus Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought ... One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? ... " (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). " ... [I'm afraid] you are still on spiritual milk rather than solid food ... " (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1-4). Words for us today! Was Luther crucified for us? Was Wesley? Was Calvin? Was anyone crucified for us but Christ? Did Christ not bear the cross to nullify our proud and contentious spirits? Where is our humility? Where is our trust in the foolishness of the cross which can overcome human wisdom and human strength - any attempt of harming the church? Friends, the challenge is before us. Are we prepared to go clean contrary to all that we know about doing church?

Another quote from David Orton: "Satan's schemes are never obvious ... Under the cover of serving the church of God, mixed and unclean motives have infiltrated ministry. As leaders, we have become ministers of the church rather than ministers of God. We have worshipped false images - images of success, spirituality and power. We import into our churches and cities the latest models and formulas that guarantee success. Looking at them from afar - from another city or country - they look so tantalizing, so promising. But like a mirage, the hoped for explosion of church growth or city transformation vanishes the moment we move forward. Why? Because we have refused to pay the price of humbling ourselves - of having our strength broken - our programs and planning - our eloquence and speaking - our music and talent - reduced to nothing. If what we are doing is not conceived in the womb of our weakness, we will never give birth to the wonder of His power. There are only two options: it is either born of God, or of . [humans]. Without experiencing brokenness, every new model produces more dependence on our organizing abilities, our communication and networking skills, our financial resources, or our musical creativity. If we import the latest success model to our city without embracing the humility of the cross we will only be bowing to empty images [- self-made power and performance] ... " (David Orton: *Snakes In The Temple*, Kent 2004, 76).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the issue is control and we need to give it up. Otherwise we never give birth to the wonder of God's power and city transformation will never ever happen.

[Extended version: Another pastor issues a passionate plea. He writes on the internet: "Christians today are encouraged to seek more power, more anointing, and more gifts ... The Church is so hungry for the presence of the Lord. I have watched thousands stream forward in hopes of obtaining some fresh outpouring of spiritual power or anointing ... Day and night I searched for spiritual power that I might overcome my sins, be a witness for the Lord, and have a powerful ministry which reached thousands. But a day came when the Lord gave me revelation of Christ in me, and I in Christ ... From that day forward I realized that I was complete in Christ, filled with all that God has, all that he IS. From that day forward I saw that the problem is not in obtaining more from the Lord, but in allowing him to break me and humble me that I may no more hinder Him through my own foolishness, pride, natural wisdom, fleshly lusts, and divided heart. I needed to decrease, and He would increase in direct proportion to my decrease ...

I will state it again: most Christians eagerly, even greedily, seek the power of God, but they resist anything that would seek to decrease, humble, test, or prove them. They want the power, but they refuse the weakness ... When God performs as expected all is well, but when He fails to perform as expected the countenance grows dark and the soul is depressed ...

Mark this well: Any power that does not come by way of weakness will ruin people ... There is a saying, 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely.' We can just as well say that spiritual power obtained apart from the weakness of the Cross will corrupt also ... pollute the spirit and pride will set in" (Chip Brogden: The Need For Brokenness, www.watchman.net).]

We need to decrease so that Christ will increase. And any power that does not come by way of such decrease, by way of weakness and brokenness - the cross, will ruin us with pride. The apostle Paul himself is a good example of that. God in his wisdom made him a woeful preacher. Remember what people said: " ... his speaking amounts to nothing ... " (2 Corinthians 10:10; cf. 11:6)? And God allowed the undermining of his authority. People even questioned whether he was an apostle. Furthermore, God gave Paul a thorn in his flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment him (2 Corinthians 12:7). Why? Any power that does not come by way of weakness will ruin us. Paul himself explains: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of . surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh ... God said to me: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' ... " (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

What about me now? What about you? After all that we have said so far, deep down in my heart I am still afraid. Praying with other Christian leaders feels fine but becoming one city-wide ministry team is still another matter. Embracing these same leaders on my patch in my local congregation does intrude on my personal space. And yet, - how can it be otherwise? - the foolishness of the crucified Jesus confronts me also. The cross wrests control from me. The cross exposes my language of control. It is not my patch, my congregation, my personal space, my members, my church. It is God's church which thrives on apparent weakness - a crucified Saviour. What can I risk to test this out? What can you risk?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we can risk it all. The cross nullifies, humbles, shames the wise, confounds those in control, bewilders, leads along a road which is clean contrary to all that we choose or contrive or desire. But that is all right. The cross destroys, only to grant new life. It is liberating to give up on our wisdom and strength.

The words of the Scriptures are true - Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." The message of the cross is the power of God because life comes out of death - the death of our sinful self. Now Christ lives in me. Christ lives in you.

Therefore, can we listen again to Jesus' prayer when he prayed: " ... may they be brought to complete unity ... " (John 17:23), " ... may they be one as we are one" (John 17:11). Can the cross make us one in Christ so that our unity reflects the perfect intimacy of love and perfect synergy of labour enjoyed by God the Father and God the Son? The issue is control. Who has it? Amen.



One Through Prayer

Jesus prayed for us to be one. Maybe he knew that nothing would come as hard to us as getting along in one church. Jesus prayed for us to be one and - that's what appears to be the case - he made sure that we know the content of his prayer because we are to repeat the words after him. Jesus prayed - John 17:20-23: "... I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message that all of them may be one ... may they be one as we are one ... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." As divided and obstinate as we are nothing but prayer brings us together. Jesus knew that and therefore he prayed what we are to pray also: "May they be brought to complete unity." "Yes - dear God, may we be brought to complete unity, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven, which includes our oneness."

That makes good sense. Begin with prayer. Who begins a partnership by bickering over differences? As we humble ourselves together before our one God, as we kneel on the floor side by side lifting our eyes up to him, we recognize on the deepest level that we are one: equally crying out to God, equally dependent on our Father in heaven, equally sinful with limited understanding, equally called to be the children of God. None of us can remain proud in prayer. So this is good advice: If you want to work on church unity in your town or city, start praying together.

The next talk will focus on how combined prayer overcomes spiritual strongholds within ourselves and the communities in which we live. However, in this talk I would like to revisit why we pray and why prayer is so powerful. John Wesley said - and maybe he overstated his case- but he said: "God does nothing but by prayer, and everything with it." An eighty-five year old preacher observed: "I have pastored only three churches in my more than sixty years of ministry. We had revival in every one. And not one of them came as a result of my preaching. They came as a result of the membership entering into a covenant to pray until revival came. And it did come, every time" (Sidlow Baxter in Bob J Whillhite: Why Pray? Altamonte Springs 1988, 11). A chaplain said: "You can organize until you are exhausted. You can plan, program and subsidize all your plans. But if you fail to pray, it is a waste of time ..." (Richard Halverson in David Bryant: Concerts Of Prayer, Venturay 1984, 39).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to have strong foundations in prayer. What can we learn about it? The Bible says - Romans 8:26-27: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches the hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

This Bible passage is a source of great comfort. When we are weak, when we don't know what to pray for, when agony and grief confuse and silence us, then the Holy Spirit helps us. In the words of this Bible passage: "... the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." And making the same point again: "... the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

God is not dependent on how clever we are with words. God is not dependent on whether we can keep our emotions together and put on a happy face. God is not dependent on right prayer priorities and strategies. There may come a time when we are weak with nothing to say, dumb-founded and beaten. Then God has to do everything by himself - take good care of us - and he does. With groans that words cannot express the Holy Spirit petitions God for us according to the will of God.

This is encouragement but has it ever struck you that the nature of divine help is strange? Why does God the Holy Spirit need to put anything in words and petition God the Father in heaven? And why does God the Son Jesus Christ also come in on the act? We read in the same chapter of the Bible - Romans 8:31-34: "... Christ Jesus, who died - more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."

Why are Father, Son and Holy Spirit - the three divine persons, our one God - why are they constantly talking to each other about what we need? It's not as if they have to inform each other and swap the latest news stories. God is in all and through all. God is all-knowing. And it's not as if Father, Son and Holy Spirit needed to iron out differences of opinion. There is perfect harmony within God. Why then these constant prayers backwards and forwards?

The answer to these questions I don't know. God baffles me. Would you be able to volunteer an answer? Why does God intercede with God? We may not know the answer to this question but do we recognize that here we have one of the keys to the Christian life? Prayers and petitions lie at the heart of God's operation in this world. The words addressed to God overcome the world. Intercession - prayer and petitions - go on all around us and for us. And the Bible says that we are likewise drawn

into that kind of communication between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As Jesus Christ intercedes for us, as the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, so we join in and intercede for ourselves and others. God says in the Bible - Philippians 4:6: " ... in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

Once again I ask the question: "Why?" "Why does God want us to pray for ourselves and the world? Why does God want us to persevere with petitions for our friends, children, parents, jobs, church, the lost, the ones without hope, and so on? Why does God want us to pray so much?"

Once again I ask the question and once again I fail to know the answer. But I read more verses from the same chapter of Romans 8 - verses 15-17: "... you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: 'Abba, dear Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

My suspicion is that God loves us so much that he doesn't want to do anything without us. We are the children of God. We are the heirs of his glory and power and might. So much so that God asks in the Bible - 1 Corinthians 6:2-3: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? ... Do you not know that you [original: we] will judge angels? ... " Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are the children and heirs of God and therefore he draws us into the family business of prayers and petitions.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit draw us into the family business of love and crying out for those that need love. We exercise authority with God. Without our agreement and partnership and love and cooperation and active petitions God doesn't want to charge ahead.

Maybe that is just a little too much responsibility for you and I. We better remind ourselves that when we are weak the Spirit helps us in our weakness. However, the Bible does not ease off. Ephesians 3:10-11: "God's intent was that now, through the church [through the people of God, through us], the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." That's just an aside but who would have thought that the boundless wisdom of God can be made known to rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms by the church which is made up of ordinary humans?

It is true. God makes his children and heirs - and that's what we are - he makes us key-allies in the salvation of the world. Therefore, in light of what we have said before, please let's change our practice. Let's pray more. As Jesus Christ intercedes for us and others, as the Holy Spirit intercedes for us and others, so we join in and intercede for ourselves and others. Intercession - prayer and petitions - that's the family business of God which overcomes the world.

A Christian counselor was driving along the highway with her husband fast asleep on the seat next to her. Next thing she knew was being elbowed in the ribs, the car running through a gravel-filled ditch at 100 km per hour and both of their lives in danger. She wanted to tap the brake and steer the car back on the road but instead she found the accelerator. Nevertheless they made it. Back home the following happened. She writes: "When we arrived home after the weekend conference, a phone call came from a friend ... 'What were you doing last Thursday about 10 am in the morning? I was typing and suddenly the Lord called me to pray for you. And I did - fervently - for about ten or fifteen minutes!' That was the exact time of our trip through the gravel ditch. I knew that not only is the Lord aware of my predicaments. He is able to call others across space to pray for me when I'm totally helpless" (John & Paula Sandford: *The Transformation of the Inner Man*, p32).

A pastor climbed a stepladder in his garage and when he was more than three meters above the cement floor, he felt the ladder pulled out from under him in an instant. He was in free fall, landing on the back of his head, his neck and upper back. He thought that "this is it" but remarkably had no structural damage or internal injuries.

He writes: That evening Cathy Schaller and her husband, Mike, went to a concert ... in a church about 10 miles from my home ... When Mike and Cathy returned to their seats after an intermission, Cathy happened to notice that her watch said 8:30. They began to dim the lights for effect when an incredibly powerful cloud of evil darkness seemed to envelope Cathy. The presence of evil was so strong around her that she could smell it. In her spirit she identified it as a spirit of death and destruction. The Holy Spirit said to her, "It has come to destroy someone you have a relationship to, but not one of your children." She felt a shield of protection raised between the force of evil and her own being, so she knew she was personally safe.

Without hesitation, Cathy began to pray under her breath for "legions of angels." Then a severe pain came into her back. It felt as though her back was breaking. She squirmed with pain and Mike whispered, "What's wrong?" All she could say was, "My spirit is troubled and my back hurts." Mike laid on hands and prayed that her back would be healed. Cathy continued to pray in the Spirit under her

breath for 20 minutes, then sensed a total release. The battle was over, the evil cloud left, she relaxed, enjoyed the rest of the concert and went home to bed.

Late that night her bedside telephone rang. It was our Sunday School class president alerting the class prayer chain to pray for me because I had suffered a terrible accident. Cathy instantly knew in her spirit what she had prayed for at the concert, but the president could not confirm the exact time of the fall.

The next morning Cathy's call to Doris and me was one of the most incredible telephone calls I can remember. We could not prove it in a court of law, but Doris and I do not need a court of law to be convinced that Cathy's faithfulness in prayer that night literally saved my physical life. Satan had sent an evil spirit ... to kill me. For years and years after that, Doris and I took Cathy and Mike out to dinner every March 25 to celebrate my deliverance from "The Fall" and express our gratitude to her for ministering to us."

Maybe for us that all sounds a little too much out there - Holy Spirit induced prayers, prayer battles with evil - but we remind ourselves of what the Bible passage of Romans 8:26-27 said: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." The Holy Spirit dwells within us and from there continually intercedes for us, voicing an unending stream of petitions to God, requesting deliverance on our behalf and on behalf of the world.

Why should it be surprising then that the same Holy Spirit, who not only dwells within us but all Christians, calls and recruits the help of other Christians for the business of prayer? We are the children and heirs of God. God loves us so much that he draws us into what he is doing himself. You and I, be still. Be ready to hear his concrete call: "Stop everything and pray for your friend. She is thinking about suicide." "Get on your knees for your church. Pray for faithfulness." "Right now I want you to pray for your city." And so on.

In prayer we wait on God to impress on us who needs our intercession.

God shares his heart with us in prayer - the objects of his love and concern - and when God is doing that: sharing his heart - you and I, let's not be surprised: something else is happening - God shares his whole heart including emotions. A pastor writes: "You may have read the testimony of praying missionaries who wept with loving compassion for the people of their calling ... this experience is a result of God's emotions being shared with a human heart in the place of intercession ... When we minister to people either through prayer or through preaching, we must give the Holy Spirit access to our emotions. Many Christians are unable to move with the Spirit into seasons of travail because they have the fear of experiencing deep emotions. The root of this hindrance is the fear of losing control, yet our spiritual life depends on your yielding control to the Holy Spirit" (John Dawson: Taking Our Cities For God, Lake Mary 2001, p165-166).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, can we hand over control of our emotions so that God can draw us even deeper into his presence and prayer? The same pastor writes: "The only thing that will sustain the intercessor through a long season of prayer is continual revelation from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit loves the Father, the Spirit reveals the Father's compassion, and the Spirit gives us the faith to know that the joy of answered prayer will always come to those who continue in faithfulness" (John Dawson: Taking Our Cities For God, Lake Mary 2001, p166).

Father, Son and Holy Spirit - the three divine persons, our one God - they share their hearts with each other in prayer and petitions and they draw us into their communion of shared love for others which overcomes the world. In prayer God shares his heart with us and then, as we take up the petitions of God, he transforms our hearts in accordance with his. This is mysterious and deep and - I say it again - beyond me. We can only accept that this is how God wants to operate.

An evangelist writes: " ... I picked up a hitchhiker late one night. He was about eighteen years old, lonely, miserable and strung out on drugs. I offered him a place to stay and a meal and talked to him about his heavenly Father. At one point in the conversation I felt such compassion for this young man that I didn't know if my heart could endure it. I said: 'Colin, God has loved you since the day you were born. He has longed for somebody to tell you how much he loves you. He understands you. He knows about every hurt and every disappointment. When you cry, He cries.'

Something stirred deep within his young heart. He looked at me with such longing, but he was unable to respond to the Lord that night. He had taken too much speed to sleep, so he continued his journey.

In the months that followed, my schedule took me to several countries, but the Lord had planted a seed of compassion within me for Colin that grew into a greater burden as time passed. The Holy

Spirit would direct me in very specific prayer. I remember calling on God for Colin's deliverance from drugs while I was driving through a Canadian snowstorm. I remember rebuking demons of sexual perversion during a prayer time in Osaka, Japan.

The day I returned to Los Angeles I was greeted by an excited Youth With A Mission worker. 'Colin got saved,' he said. 'Which Colin?' I said, guarding my hopes. 'Some guy you picked up hitchhiking. He got saved today, just before you got here,' he said.

When I opened the front door of the Discipleship Training School, there he was, tears in his eyes, surrounded by students who had just led him in the sinner's prayer. He had been in a nearby park dealing some dope when he looked through the trees and recognized the Youth With A Mission property. He remembered the kindness of the Lord to him, threw his drugs into a trash can and stumbled across the street weeping.

When a staff responded to his knock at the door he said: 'I want to come in. I need to get saved.' And of course he was welcomed into the family of God."

The pastor concludes: "During my months of prayer for Colin, I was amazed at the Holy Spirit's ability to move my emotions. I had only talked to him briefly, but a supernatural energy for prayer was awakened with me. If Christ 'always lives to make intercession for them' (Hebrews 7:25), then we must receive by faith this aspect of His life even as we have received His cleansing and His victory over sin. Christ's prayer life must be expressed through us by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit" (John Dawson: Taking Our Cities For God, Lake Mary 2001, p166-167).

It's time to come to a close. Brothers and sisters in Christ, God encourages us in our prayer life. We are not doing anything off our own back but our one God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit themselves - they practice intercession and draw us into their divine communion of prayer and petitions. I remind us of the Scriptures - Romans 8:26-27: "... the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express ... the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will." And Romans 8:31-34: "... Christ Jesus, who died - more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."

So when we are asked in the Bible - Philippians 4:6: "... in everything, by prayer and petitions, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God," then we are drawn into the depth and mystery and power of God himself.

We become part of the prayers that flow from God to God and these prayers do gain the release of divine power. There is union with God - again from Romans chapter 8, verse 9: "You are controlled ... by the Spirit ... the Spirit lives in you."

What are we to do in response to that? Next time we pray, we commit to praying for ourselves and others. We ask God to take control of our prayer time, wait on God to impress on us what we are to pray for, hand over control so that God may even share his emotions with us, and then petition God in faithfulness. Amazing answers are sure to follow. We may even become what we are: one with each other. Amen.

One In Repentance



In 2003 one Sunday night Toowoomba Christian churches embarked on something new. Rangeville Community church, Christian Outreach Centre, Church of Christ, Wesleyan Methodists, St Bart's Anglican, Living Grace Lutheran, Toowoomba City Church, Vision Community Church, Newtown Uniting, Assemblies of God, Community Baptist, West-Presbyterians, Salvation Army and the list goes on - **leaders from these churches stood up and repented on behalf of their respective communities. One by one senior pastors went to the microphone, addressed the auditorium and confessed the failings of their churches. They said: "We have judged you. We have failed to help you. We hurt you with pride and arrogance. We have pried away your members. On behalf of our community I, as a pastor of the church, humble myself before God and you, apologize and say sorry."** Believe me. That wasn't easy to do. Why then did we do it?

All over the world Christians rediscover some basic Bible teaching. Peter Wagner, author of many books, pastor and teacher, he says: "Responsible research will frequently uncover sins of a nation or city [or a church] which have been committed in the past, sometimes generations ago, and which have become strongholds of the forces of darkness ... When we corporately confess those sins ... through what many are calling 'identificational repentance', they can be remitted through Jesus' blood shed on the cross ... No aspect of warfare prayer is more important than identificational repentance" (C. Peter Wagner: Confronting The Powers, p260).

So one Sunday night in 2003 Toowoomba pastors practised what many are calling "identificational repentance" of which Peter Wagner says: "No aspect of warfare prayer is more important than identificational repentance." Do we get a handle on this? Christians are used to confess their sins but this seems to go beyond the private confessions of individual sinners. Are you confused? Join the club. The same Peter Wagner shares in another publication: "For me at least this was very new. I have been a Christian for 45 years, and I never once recall hearing a sermon from the pulpit on identificational repentance. I have four graduate degrees in religion from respectable academic institutions, and I was never taught a class on the subject ..." (Peter C. Wagner: The Power To Heal The Past, From The Internet).

Right now we won't teach a class on the subject but use the first chapter of Nehemiah to relearn three basic Biblical assumptions: 1. When God looks at us, he is not just looking at one person here and one person there, isolated individuals, independent agents. He is looking at us belonging to a community, belonging to a body of people, being one with others. 2. When we sin, then that is not just a private affair between me and God, but has consequences for the entire community. The sin of one can bring judgement on all. 3. Sin and its side-effects, satanic strongholds and the reaping of judgement, can be removed by those who act on behalf of their community and repent in its place.

I repeat: 1. God sees you and me as belonging to and being one with a community. 2. When you or I sin, then that sin has consequences for others as well - the community, our families, churches, cities or nations. 3. As you or I fall on our knees and repent of the sins of our community - past and present, we free our communities from the stranglehold of sin through the forgiveness that comes from God.

Let's unpack this. Many years after the Babylonians had expelled the Jews from their homeland, a small remnant was allowed to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah, who was the cupbearer of the Persian king, inquired how that remnant was doing. He received the report that - Nehemiah 1:3: "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." So Nehemiah received bad news. The remnant of Jews in Jerusalem were exposed to their enemies and in danger.

This is what Nehemiah did next - Nehemiah 1:4-7: "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. [That's an important verse. If you allow me to sidetrack for a moment, I think that here we have another key to the effectiveness of repentance and prayer. Weeping, mourning, fasting - God promised not to ignore that kind of passion, that kind of unrelenting desire to have God come and work salvation (cf. Matthew 15:21-28). But that is another message for another day. Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted and then prayed:] O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses."

What Nehemiah seemed to assume was that the broken down walls of Jerusalem and its burned gates were caused by the sins of Israel. That's tough in itself because how can that be after so many

years in exile and punishment? Is there no end to God's wrath? Then, Nehemiah knew as well as we do now that not everyone may have sinned to the same degree. The majority even may not have done anything. However, whether this seems to be fair to our western minds or not, the people of one people group frequently share one common destiny. Nehemiah was right assuming that the sins committed by some can and had negative national consequences, and he was right assuming that he himself in Persia was somehow tied up with what happened to the walls and gates of Jerusalem - thousands of miles away. Nehemiah prayed: "Dear God, I confess the sins of myself and my father's house."

Christians of today, let's wake up to this. When one of us sins, the whole family, church, city and nation suffers. The consequences may not be immediately catastrophic but harm is done. Sin is not a private but corporate affair affecting communities. Does this strike us as something new? It's not new but in fact lies at the very core of our faith. The Bible says - 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (cf. Romans 5:12-21). "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive," which means that the first human Adam disobeyed God in the garden of Eden and was therefore doomed to die together with all of his descendants including us.

Just imagine: The sin of one brings death to all even to this day. Death was a punishment from God until Jesus Christ conquered death and the devil by rising from his grave to eternal life. Through faith in Jesus now all people will be made alive in the same glorious way- again including us. Wouldn't you agree? This is basic biblical teaching on salvation which accentuates to us that our existence is corporate. As in one person we all die, so in one person all will be made alive.

Let me tell you the story of Achan. Achan was one of God's people who just witnessed the sacking of the city of Jericho. He entered the conquered city, went from house to house looting and plundering, taking for himself a beautiful robe, silver and gold. The only problem was that God had instructed not to take anything. Everything was to be brought to the holy place of worship. But Achan was lucky. No one saw him - or so he thought.

Soon afterwards the people of Israel went on another raid and were surprisingly beaten and demoralized by a smaller outfit. Joshua, the leader of the army, and the elders of Israel responded, tore their clothes, fell facedown to the ground before God, sprinkled dust on their heads and then Joshua asked: "What happened, God? Why were we beaten?"

The Lord answered: "... Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant ... They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen; they have lied; they have put them with their possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies ... I will be not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction" (Joshua 7:11-12). God then proceeded to point out the guilty Achan and all of Israel stoned him.

God judged the entire nation because of one man. He didn't say: "Achan has sinned." He said: "Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant ... that is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies ..."

You know - from a certain perspective this story may sound like the people of Israel needed a scape-goat after an unexpected military defeat. Someone needed to be blamed and so the thief Achan became a convenient victim. He was stoned for a raid gone wrong which is mob logic. However, brothers and sisters in Christ, can I encourage us to take this a little more seriously. Sin is not a private but corporate affair. The sin of one affects all.

Therefore may I first of all encourage you and I? Be careful in your conduct. When one of us gives in to anger or gossip, when one of us secretly consumes pornography or commits adultery, when one of us gives in to pride and greed, then all of us as a community suffer the consequences of that sin. Something unclean comes into our midst that stands in opposition to the holiness of God and the workings of the Holy Spirit. We will all feel that or be affected by it.

As in small neighborhoods so also on a bigger scale most of us can observe what is happening: Violence begets violence. Abuse begets abuse. Disunity begets disunity. Exploitation begets exploitation. Racism begets racism. And so on. People sin and then attitudes, cultures and vibes get passed on from one generation to the next. Furthermore, the breaking of God's holy law, the physical and spiritual design of creation, brings with it judgement. Unless God intervenes we reap what we sow.

Since I was born and bred in Germany let me quote what a counselor writes about the Germans: "[My wife] and I know a number of believers in Germany who struggle to experience God in their spirits. To them the Christian faith is primarily mental. If they begin to experience rather than simply apprehend the Holy Spirit, their minds jump into the experience, analyze, box and kill it. They are like a young medical student who was doing fine with his fiance until one night, as he was kissing her, she caught him

holding her pulse and checking his watch! That is what the mind does to spiritual experiences” (John Loren Sandford: Healing The Nations. A Call To Global Intercession, Grand Rapids 2000, p192).

Now this counselor traces this condition to unfortunate developments in church history. He writes: “Almost a thousand years ago Germanic people turned from experiencing God to thinking about him. For four centuries, from A.D. 950 to 1350, the Eastern and Western wings of the Roman Catholic Church drifted apart from each other” (John Loren Sandford: Healing The Nations. A Call To Global Intercession, Grand Rapids 2000, p192). And so on.

We don't have to get into details and we don't have to be entirely convinced to sense that national identities and traits may be caused by past actions of long deceased ancestors. Do Germans struggle with experiencing the Holy Spirit because as soon as he comes they become scientific, detached and objective, analyzing him to death? Intriguing.

Since I now live in Australia let me give the counselor's observations on Australia. He writes: “Australians, like Americans, are usually warm, open and outspoken. But that nation (as you probably recall) began as a British penal colony, criminal outcasts abused by some British guards and soldiers. One of the historical results has been a ‘down under’ mentality, bitter root judgements and expectancies to be abused and regularly given the short end of the stick. In war this has meant that almost invariably they are assigned to suicidal tasks like Gallipoli ... In the Second World War Australians were assigned to attack entrenched Japanese positions in the jungle mountains of Borneo, in tropical heat and humidity, often through downpours and swarmed by biting insects. Today, politically and economically, Australians still expect and often receive the same treatment” (John Loren Sandford: Healing The Nations. A Call To Global Intercession, Grand Rapids 2000, p193-194).

Interesting. Do we always expect the short end of the stick? I leave that to your discernment. That much is clear. Friends, somehow sin begets sin over time spiraling into an ever more devastating cycle of destruction until repentance and forgiveness break the cycle and bring healing to families, churches, cities and nations.

In 1993 a white pastor said at a reconciliation ceremony in the United States - and here please listen to his understanding of how individual sins cause the land to be defiled and thus the entire community to be judged. Sin not only begets sin because of learned behaviour but a violation of God's law, his physical and spiritual design of creation, makes us reap what we sow. Sin begets natural consequences of what we may call judgement - now this pastor said: “We believe that our Father God is both grieved and angry over the injustices and the atrocities that we, the white man, have committed against the Native American peoples. We have lied, cheated, stolen, desecrated and killed. These things, apart from the pain and suffering they have visited upon the Indians, also have offended God and aroused his wrath. Isaiah 24:5-6a says: ‘The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, and broke the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty ... We are told in Numbers 35:33 that the shedding of innocent blood ‘pollutes [and defiles] the land.’ We have been guilty of this also. 2 Chronicles 34:21 says: ‘For great is the wrath of the Lord which is poured out on us because our fathers have not observed the word of the Lord, to do according to all that is written in this book.’ ... “ (John Dawson: “Healing America's Wounds”, Ventura 1994, p150).

Now if we discern that our community suffers from polluted land, blockages to receiving God's grace, broken families, greed, self-righteousness, racism, low self-esteem, persistently corrupt leadership, whatever sinful and destructive cultural traits we can decipher, then we - the Christian members of our community - we may trace this condition to its potential root cause and on behalf of the community repent of it. This is what the white pastor and others did in the presence of the Native Americans and this is what Nehemiah did in the Bible.

Nehemiah prayed: “O Lord, God of heaven, ... I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house have committed against you ... We have not obeyed your commands, decrees and laws ... ” Nehemiah - one man serving as a cup-bearer at the court of the Persian king - he prayed: “I confess the sins we Israelites ... have committed against you God.” The one man Nehemiah repented on behalf of the entire nation. Again as Westerners we may ask: “How can that work? Don't we all have to repent of our own sins? Can I repent of your sins? And can you repent of mine?” Apparently, to a degree, we can.

God said in the Bible - Ezekiel 22:29-30: “The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice. I looked for a person among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none” (cf. Ezekiel 13:4-5).

Apparently God is looking for persons that build up the wall and stand in the gap on behalf of the land, meaning God is looking for persons that repent on behalf of their communities, pray for their people so that God's judgement may not fall on them. God somehow works like that. You and I, we

know that on the cross Jesus stood in the gap for us. He took upon himself our sin so that God would not judge us. This is the way of God.

Back to my own circumstances and city. In 2003 one Sunday night Toowoomba Christian churches did embark on something new. We built up the wall and stood in the gap. We confessed our own sin and the sins of our communities. We repented on behalf of our churches and now trust that God will respond. He may do something about the walls of Jerusalem that are broken down and its gates that have been burned with fire - the ruins of our lives and the people we have hurt.

A word of encouragement. On the one hand it is unfortunate that the sin of one may bring judgement on an entire community including myself but on the other hand isn't it just awesome: The prayer of one person - be it you or I, young or old - the prayer of one person or the prayers of a small dedicated group in your community may in turn bring healing to us all. If that is not an encouragement to prayer, I don't know what is. Let's be like Nehemiah. He wept, mourned, fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. He said: "O Lord, ... your servant is praying before you day and night ... I confess the sins we ... have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you ... We are hurting and need your healing ..."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, in your church, in your town, in your city, in your nation put the Word of God into practice. I close by summarizing again the main points: 1. We pray that we don't fall into temptation ourselves. God forbid that it is our sin which brings harm first to ourselves and then to our communities. 2. We look at our community, do research and identify where sin has a stronghold among us. 3. On behalf of our community we confess that sin and ask God for forgiveness. 4. Where the sin of our community has wounded others, we repent to those that we have hurt, reconcile and attempt to restore that which has been damaged or destroyed.

You may get an idea now that repentance is costly. This is not easy. Like Nehemiah we may do quite a bit of weeping, mourning and fasting. However, let's not shy away from this as the church in the city. Amen.



One For Our City

Jesus prayed in John 17 - verses 20-23: " ... May they [the disciples] also be in us [the Father and the Son] so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus is praying for us which means that there is hope for us. As we listen in on this prayer, we discover that God wants to lead us, is committed to lead us, is determined to make us succeed, where we ourselves fear to tread. Jesus' prayer challenges us on three accounts: 1. Complete unity among all Christians requires more than our current practice. 2. Unity facilitates revival. 3. Church unity leads to the pastoring of cities - not just congregations.

What I take for granted by now is that church unity - our unity - is a unity of the Holy Spirit and not of agreement in all doctrines and experience. The Bible says - 1 Corinthians 12:3: " ... no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." Since the Holy Spirit has had mercy on us and has made us believe in the same Lord, therefore we all belong together - whether we like it or not. You can choose your friends but not your family.

Taking that for granted I would like to make only brief comments on the first two points which I mentioned and then mainly concentrate on the third point. Point number one: Complete unity among all Christians - and that is what Jesus is praying about - complete unity requires more than our current practice. That raises the question: "How do we achieve a greater measure of functioning together as the one body of Christ?"

Point number two: Unity facilitates revival. Jesus clearly made a connection between church unity and mission effectiveness which brings us straight away to point number three. Point number three: Church unity leads to the pastoring of cities - not just congregations. In John 17:20-23 Jesus foreshadowed that church unity leads to world evangelism. He said: "... May they [the disciples] also be in us [the Father and the Son] so that the world may believe that you have sent me ... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." Unity among Christians will make the world take notice of God. The world - including our town or city!

Let's focus on where we live. How big is our vision? Can we see with the eyes of faith and behold an entire city transformed? How would we function as Christians if education, the media, government, leisure, business, ... , everything was under the lordship of Jesus Christ? How would we provide spiritual support and nurture to Christians actively pursuing the transformation of their work-places and areas of influence?

Tommy Tenney writes: "If we are going to reach our cities, we must change our mind-set. It is time to stop pastoring our churches and start pastoring the cities in which we live. As long as you just pastor your church, that's all you'll ever have. But if you can start pastoring your city, then revival will come to your city. It is time for the gatekeepers to take their places in the gates and to guard the source of influence over a city" (Tommy Tenney: God's Dream Team, Ventura 1999, p90).

Another quote from him: "One of the analogies I've referred to in this book is that of the 'gatekeepers'. This term can refer to pastors, intercessors, teachers - virtually anyone who exercises spiritual influence. The same term is equally valid in both the spiritual and the secular realms. There are certain influential people in the secular realm - including bankers, lawyers, professors, doctors - through whom influence is channeled into and out of a city. This universal pattern tells us that if we want to affect the spiritual atmosphere of our cities, then there must be spiritual gatekeepers" (Tommy Tenney: God's Dream Team, Ventura 1999, p130).

Who are the spiritual gatekeepers in my city, in your city? Who are the people of God-given influence in business and politics, the media and education? Do we begin to share God's vision for our entire community - entire cities and nations, not just churches?

I hand over to Ian Shelton now. He came up with an illustration which may help us to see how God wants us to reach into every aspect of society.

Ian Shelton & The Transformation Wheel

This “old fashion wood and steel wagon” wheel is an attempt to put in diagram form what a community/city/nation could look like if Jesus was its Lord and was the centre of its life.

The central steel axle is the Lord Jesus who also “centres” life and gives meaning and hope. The wooden hub is the church in unity centred on Jesus. Only the church of the city in unity can centre totally on Jesus. All lack of unity reveals some lack in declaring Jesus Lord and the centre of all life.

The wooden hub is held together by a small outer steel rim representing the common servant leaders or elders of that unified citywide church. Thus the hub in its completeness displays the church gathered as one in corporate worship of its Lord and at the same time bowing in humble obedience to his Word.

Out from the hub radiate the spokes supporting the outer rim and together representing the church scattered through the spheres of society that support the people in their families along with the vulnerable: aged, young and poor.

The eight spokes represent the spheres of society (sport/arts/leisure, welfare, health, media & information, law/police/judiciary, politics & government, business & commerce, education) that the Lord would govern and bless for the betterment of community life ... It is the mission of each Christian operating in a sphere to ensure that the sphere reflects obedience to God’s Word and submits to his Lordship thus ensuring a sphere that would bring great blessing to the citizens of that community.

We currently live in a community where the spheres reflect, in many cases, the work of the “enemy” who only delights in destruction. Broken spheres make for a poor wheel.

Godly spheres ensure health, vibrant families - the outer metal rim - ensuring care and blessing for the vulnerable - aged, young and poor. Blessed families run as a central theme from the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12 through to the New Testament. No society can claim any blessing without strong families. A transformed city brings great glory to God.

Yes, a transformed city where all the spheres - sport/arts/leisure, welfare, health, media & information, law/police/judiciary, politics & government, business & commerce, education - a transformed city where all the spheres come under the lordship of Christ brings great glory to God. What that requires though is that we begin to pastor cities not just congregations and that we do that together.

How we may ask? How can churches effectively unite so that there will be some concrete results? What does God want? What is he doing and how does he want us to join in? In what manner does he want to grace us with complete unity?

Sometimes when pastors get together and together strategize/plan for action, an objection is raised: “We need more prayer, not more strategies.” And most of the time that objection is true. Many a time we don’t pray enough. However, that objection can also have another root. We shy away from strategies because strategies require structure, and as soon as you talk structure, you talk power and we don’t want to share it.

Reinhold Scharnowski writes: “At city or national level, we may have a good idea or two, and a couple of tactical methods, such as the Alpha course, but we hardly have any strategies, in the all-encompassing, long-term sense. One of the reasons, particularly in Switzerland, is the lack of true leadership at city level. We are good at allowing everyone to contribute, but often bad at orchestrating the contributions to become a choir. Either nobody wants to take responsibility for a servant leadership, or they are democratically neutralized with all sorts of concerns. How may courageous initiatives are stopped because someone has a problem with some aspect or another? Building something which lasts in a federal system is a real challenge” (Reinhold Scharnowski: CityVision - A Strategy For Our Cities And Regions, From The Internet).

Imagine a committee of hundreds of pastors equally sharing and then finding consensus on a future plan of action. That’s the federal system and we struggle to make it work. Jack Dennison observes that our city reaching initiative has become largely event and activity driven.

He writes: “ ... our dream of seeing the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole city ... requires a different approach, a strategic approach, rather than one that is punctuated by one event or activity after another ... ” (Jack Dennison: Cityreach International Report, October 2000).

He may be right. Change happens slowly. Christians mature slowly. A city transforms slowly. Usually there is a slow progression from spiritual milk to solid meat. Therefore a one-off event or activity cannot be a substitute for sustained outreach and nurture.

Once again, how can we plan for long-term transformation without getting bogged down by a federal system where no true leadership emerges? The answer is difficult and we have to be careful. We may benefit from hearing the warning again: “We need more prayer, before any strategy.”

Along the same lines a church consultant shares some wise insights. He writes: “ ... if we do what seems right to us, it may well be wrong ... I recently met with a national leadership team representing 10 cities in their country ... One city in particular was deeply challenged by the need to identify the biblical leaders of the City Church. They promptly returned home, called together a dozen pastors and voted on the appointment of a handful of leaders to be ‘city elders’. In so doing, I am convinced; killed the initiative at its inception. Though leaders are needed, following methods of the past (voting, balloting, assigning, etc.) to select them is wrong, and the usually harmful approach” (Jack Dennison: Cityreach International Report, October 2000).

Voting and balloting may not always be the wrong approach but we have to be careful. What does God want? We need to wait on him. Who is he raising up in our midst? As we move from a federal system to a system where we recognize citywide church leadership of some sort, much prayer and spiritual discernment is needed - let alone humility and the surrendering of pride.

You may have guessed by now that I am a pastor because - as one belonging to the clergy - I am in danger of missing the point. The true transformation of cities and nations requires more than just pastors getting their act together.

City elders, gate keepers - call them what you like - they include more than just ordained people because we need leadership in the spheres of government, education, business, media, and so on, and pastors are not usually the experts in these spheres. Christian men and women, people of wisdom, professionals need to live out their calling and provide spiritual leadership where they live and work, rest and play.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, how God wants to raise up the various leaders even in our city I don't know. And whether we would be willing to recognize them I don't know either. However, allow me to share some personal thoughts. This is just food for thought and not necessarily divine inspiration. There are some church leaders that advocate a return to what the early church in Jerusalem did, that is: people meet in both small house groups and citywide gatherings. The Bible says in

Acts 2:46-47: “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. [And] they broke bread in their homes and ate together [there] ... praising God ... “ So there were two types of church meetings: small groups and citywide stadium events. And just imagine they did that daily and God added to their number daily.

While I would not go as far as saying that what happened in Jerusalem mitigates against having our own traditional medium-sized congregation, I do think that there is merit in resurrecting regular citywide worship. I know that some of that is already happening - usually on a free Sunday evening or a week night.

However, what if Christians of a city came together on a regular basis for the regular worship time of Sunday morning? Maybe do so every three months. I think that could have a number of positive outcomes:

1. Church unity would then not just be an additional church program which adds to the burden of already busy people.
2. Church unity would no longer be treated as an optional extra but become central to who we are and what we do in the city.
3. Regular citywide worship - sacrificing our church segregation on Sunday mornings, venturing outside of our own four walls - that would signal to believers and unbelievers alike that we are not just about growing our own congregations but the kingdom of God in this place.
4. Regular citywide worship would shape a common identity among Christians. As we pray and praise God together, hear his appointed word, he may answer us with shared revelation and inspiration.
5. Regular citywide worship would provide a platform for citywide needs and initiatives.
6. Regular citywide worship would bring those together in worship that during the week need to work together in the spheres of the city.

At this point of time you may say: “Dream on,” and you are right. There are so many valid concerns: “We need to meet in our own building because we cannot miss out on the offering. You never get everyone to come. We couldn't agree on the worship style.” And so on. Anyway, that was just food for thought.

Can we consider a response to what we have heard? Complete unity - the unity which Jesus prayed about and which facilitates the discipling of nations - that kind of unity requires more than our current practice. God wants us to pastor cities and nations, not just congregations. How is that going to take shape? How much are you prepared to change? Amen.

