

Sound Living

The Purpose of the Church

Jerry Nelson

Church—Why bother? Most of us long to be different and to have our lives changed. According to God’s word, the change we long for and the relationships we covet are found in the church because that is the way God made us. Christianity is not only a private affair between God and the individual. We are converted, save and born again into a community—a community of faith, the body of Christ, the Church. Come, join the community of God—The Church!

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Chapter One

Church—Why Bother? Matthew 6:7-8

The term, “spiritual community” is made up of two words, each with so many definitions that the meaning of the entire phrase becomes obscure.

I went “on-line” to see what came up by searching for “spiritual community.” I was surprised and chagrined to see that most sites were “New Age” or “Buddhist.” The slogan of one site was, “Through this process WE the people become I the ONE achieving our ultimate goal—ONENESS.”

But in spite of that and its other uses, we use the term because we are talking about relationships with God and each other that connect at the very core of who we are. We are talking about genuinely belonging and about truly mattering. We are talking about what Jesus offered when he said he came to give us life—life to the full.

When he’s in town and his own or his kids’ athletics don’t conflict, he usually attends church on Sundays. But if I pressed him as to **why** he attends I’m guessing he’d have a hard time coming up with something that sounded significant. I might hear:

- “Well, I’ve **always** gone to church.”
- “Going to church is what Christians **do.**”
- “Doesn’t the Bible say we are **supposed** to go to church?”
- “I want my **kids** in church.”

Maybe you have a better answer than that, right now, but at times even for many of us we wonder, “Church, why

bother?" Or maybe it isn't even thought—we just slowly, quietly disengage and we hardly notice it ourselves until we realize we don't really miss it when we don't go. Why bother?

"Doesn't the Bible say we are supposed to go to church?"

Most of us want very much to be different. I'm not talking about being richer, smarter or more famous. We probably wouldn't mind that either but I mean that most of us know we are not, within, the kind of person we want to be and should be. You don't have to be very old before you begin to understand that self-help programs aren't likely to make the changes we need. We tried enough times to change with little result that we realize something is broken.

Not only do we wish we were different, but most of us long for relationships that are much deeper than we experience. We long to connect at ways far deeper than the superficial we usually experience. At a certain level we are lonely and it hurts but we have even a greater fear of trying to connect and being rejected. And so, we live in uncomfortable isolation, simply putting on a happy smile much of the time.

But according to God's Word, the change we long for and the relationships we covet are found **in the church** because that is the way God made us.

And when I say, "change and relationships are found in the church," I must quickly add that I am not defining church as the building or the institution or the program. I am using a biblical definition of the church as God's new community—people spiritually connected to each other in committed

relationships.

Something very unhealthy has developed in the evangelical church over the years—something we have adopted from the culture. That unhealthy value is “individualism” and it has resulted in an “individualistic Christianity.” We ask, “Church, why bother?” **because we have reduced Christianity to a private affair** between God and the individual. William Willimon has written, “American Protestantism often impresses observers as a highly individualized, privatized, psychological affair... Individual conversion experiences (in which individuals are saved from individual sins in order to have individual relationships with Jesus) are viewed by some evangelicals as the end rather than the beginning of the life of faith. The church becomes (little more than) a conglomerate of like-minded individuals who find it useful to congregate in order to keep the flame of individual religious experience alive and to foster it in others.”¹

I think Willimon is right. We speak and act as if getting our personal sins forgiven and getting our own ticket to heaven is the sum of what it means to be a Christian. And furthermore we sometimes think the only reason for church is to tell others about their need for getting their sins forgiven and getting to heaven. Church gets reduced to an assembly of individuals emphasizing an individual religion. But as Willimon points out, individual, personal conversion is not the conclusion of the life of faith but simply the beginning. We are converted, saved, born again, **into a community**—a community of faith, the body of Christ, the church.

An Asian Indian by the name of George David, wrote an excellent little book, I came across recently, entitled, *The Eclipse and Rediscovery of Person:*

“Community is what we in our generation, who have been socialized in a secular culture, are conscious of having lost. We need to realize afresh that we have lost community because our very personhood is being eroded by secularism. Our self-understanding has sub-consciously shifted, so that we (see ourselves most importantly as) autonomous individuals.”²

We are so intent on being individuals, having autonomy, that we have sacrificed our personhood. George David, following Paul Tournier and others, makes an important distinction between being merely an individual and also being a person. The concept of “individual” speaks of number—you are one, alone, separate from. That word “individual” emphasizes autonomy, freedom, and independence. In and of itself, being an individual is not wrong but when it excludes the more important aspect of what it means to be “person” then individualism is harmful. We are not just individuals; we are, more importantly, persons. You say that just sounds like semantics. Listen, and I think you will hear a real difference in the distinction.

As I just said, the word “individual” refers only to number—the number “one” and by definition “individual” emphasizes our separateness from others. The word “person” speaks of relationship and “personhood” doesn’t exist apart from relationship. “The ‘I’ can have no real knowledge of itself apart from others. When two selves interact mutually they develop common attitudes, interests, beliefs and goals. When the interaction is such that the individuality of each is not lost but rather respected by the other, they (each) develop a relational self. It is (this relationship) that transforms an individual into a person... A person possesses not only an individual self, but also a relational self, which is possessed in common with another, making them persons to each other.”³ Yes, God made us individually but

He created us to live in relationship. Genesis 2:18 says *"The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone.'"*

God created human life to live in fellowship (not just alongside but in relationship) with Him and with others. Derek Kidner writes, "(A person) will not **live** until he **loves, giving himself away to another...**"⁴ And when God created us to live in relationship, to be persons, He was mirroring his own personhood. Genesis 1:26-27 says, *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'"*

***"(A person) will not live until he loves,
giving himself away to another..."***

God, as "three persons in one," is central to who God is. Even before we existed God was love. It is not just that God is love in some abstract conceptual way but that God loves and love necessitates relationship—in this case the relationship was between the three persons of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is interesting how Islam defines Allah; of the 99 attributes given to Allah in the Koran, never is there a mention of love. In great contrast, the CENTRAL self-revelation of God is that He is love. Love is impossible alone. Love is only meaningful if there is some other to love.⁵

God would cease to be God if He were not a Trinity. Catherine LaCugna writes:

"The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life.... (Our purpose) is to participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in

the Spirit... Divine life is therefore our life. The heart of the Christ life is to be united with the God of Jesus Christ by means of communion with each other. The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately therefore a teaching not about the abstract nature of God, nor about God in isolation from everything other than God, but a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other."⁶ Yes, God would cease to be God if He were not a Trinity. And while we might remain individuals, we would cease to be persons

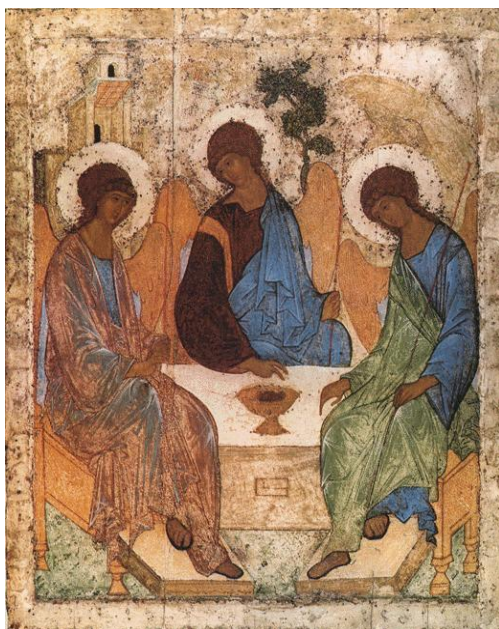
To be fully human, to be "person," is to bear the image of God

outside of relationships.

To be fully human, to be "person," is to bear the image of God. And thus to be truly human or fully human we must live in relationship with others as God does—again, not simply among others but in genuine connectedness to others. That is why Jesus prays to the Father in John 17:11, "*Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name...so that they may be one as we are one.*"

In the 14th Century a Russian monk by the name of Andrei Rublev painted what became a very famous icon—a pictorial representation of a deeper truth. It is called "The Holy Trinity." It obviously has much symbolism in it. But the most basic intent was to communicate the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity.

- The faces are exactly the same noting the **oneness** of God.
- The three figures note the **"three-ness"** of that one God.
- And the head of each inclined toward the heads of the others, denote intimacy.



Rublev quite obviously painted the three figures within a circle. If you think of that circle not in two dimensions but in three dimensions like a sphere, the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit reaches out to include us. That is what true humanity is about—a relationship with the Triune God—a humanity that necessarily includes each other. As I said earlier, God would cease to be God if He were not a Trinity. And while we might remain individuals, we would cease to be persons outside of relationships.

But what do we have instead? Years ago when the late Mother Theresa visited the United States she was asked about the wealth of America in contrast to the poverty of India. She responded that while it is true that India has poverty of **body**, America seems to have a poverty of **soul**. “She said that in the United States she had seen such terrible loneliness. Thirty years ago that loneliness was relegated mostly to convalescent homes and college dorms.

Now it is the epidemic that is behind cell phones, full day planners, and the manicured lawns of the middle and upper-classes: the abject loneliness of people who live in cities teeming with people or, even worse, in homes where people are close but increasingly disconnected.”⁷

We have too much adopted the culture’s priority of individual autonomy. We have placed individual freedom as the highest value to be achieved and sustained. We are so convinced that autonomy must have priority that we will sacrifice everything else to have it, including the sacrifice of true community.

***While we might remain individuals,
we would cease to be persons
outside of relationships***

When that happens “church” becomes merely a congregation of individuals, each striving to maintain his or her freedom, and being part of a congregation only to serve his or her own interests. We don’t really give, serve or love others for others, we just act in certain ways to get for ourselves. And when it is merely a collection of individuals bumping up against each other in self-serving ways there is no community, no church.

William Dyrness said, “Freedom to be left alone has become the curse of being alone.”⁸ Sin has done that. Sin has turned persons into merely individuals. Sin has isolated us and keeps us apart and keeps us from being fully functioning persons made in the image of God—connected to one another, living in real community. And that is what Jesus came to change:

- He came to give us worth, based not on what we do but who we are by His grace.

- He came to change us, to free us from our self-protecting individualism.
- He came to set us free to be persons, persons who are loved and who love.

Ephesians 2:19-22 says, *“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”*

It’s important to notice that the Apostle Paul here is not writing merely of a Christian as an individual but of Christians in relationship with Christ and each other; he is addressing us in the church. We, together, are God’s temple. Earlier I said God would cease to be God apart from the relationships and that we would cease to be persons apart from relationships. Now I add, **we cannot be Christians apart from the church.** 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 says, *“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”*

In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul is not describing your individual body but the church—the body of Christ. And in 1 Corinthians 12:27 he writes, *“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”*

Christians are not just born again individuals; we are born into a family. We become the new spiritual community, the new people of God in Christ. The only context for being Christian is the church—the community of believers. I’ve

quoted it often but it is so true: Paul Tournier wrote "There are two things you cannot do alone. One is to be married and the other is to be a Christian."⁹

Some may say, "My church is watching Charles Stanley or James Kennedy on television." Or others may say, "My church is standing on the top of Peak 8 at Breckenridge and praising God for all He has made." I hope they don't mean what they are saying. It would be like saying my marriage is watching videos by Gary Smalley or James Dobson. The church is God's people living in relationship with each other. But this is where the definition of church gets "down and dirty." It is not church when all it includes is individuals attending the same programs. It's church when the individuals, as persons are connecting, knowing each other, caring about and for each other, and investing in each other. And that is where it gets hard because while no one objects to the idea of community, it's people that make it hard. It's a variation on the old Charlie Brown theme: "I like church, it's people I can't stand."

One author wrote, "When it comes to the religion called Christianity, it's the scandal of particularity that bothers us. The thing that sticks in our craw is not that the gospel is about love, peace, freedom, liberation or any other loveable abstraction. What sticks in our craw are the particulars, the messy side of Christianity, imperfect people and an imperfect church. Many approve of both the idea of following Christ and the concept of the church. But they are horrified by the particulars. It was the romantic poet Southey who said, 'I could believe in the Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church.' Jesus has many admirers who feel that he married beneath his station. They love Christ but are unable to love those whom he loved."¹⁰

But it is precisely those brothers and sisters in Christ that we are called to love. Rarely does the Bible speak of the church abstractly. Almost always the word church is a reference to a specific group of people in a specific location. These were real people with all kinds of real differences, conflicts, hard-to-get-along-with personalities, questionable pasts, annoying habits, and the rest that drive people apart.

We are a church. A church made up of professionals and laborers, highly educated and barely educated, short and tall, slim and not-so-slim, kind and selfish, liars, thieves, adulterers, gossips, murderers, the gentle and the angry – all kinds, those you'd love to spend time with and those you wish you never had to be around. But it is us, with all of our abilities and warts and brokenness that God has called to be part of this church – to be in relationship with each other. Robert Saucy wrote, "It is in fact, God's purpose through the miracle of redemption to weld together a divided and estranged humanity into a living unity where differences...are all transcended in Christ."¹¹

There have always been some who have understood what church is about but **for too many of us we have seen church as something we attend rather than a people we are truly a part of.** The Bible's definition of church is not a building or a program but a community. This is not a YMCA where you simply pay your dues and keep the rules. The church is people who are asking you to become part of their lives.

I began this message by saying most of us desire to be different. Within each one of us there is a spiritual battle going on—a battle for our souls—and that battle will only be won with the help of other Christians. That is how God made us—to be persons living in community, real

community where people not only know your name, they know your heart. Larry Crabb has written powerfully of this need in his book, *The Safest Place on Earth*:

"The cry from the heart is to be part of a true church, to participate in spiritual community, to engage in spiritual conversations of worship with God and of co-journeying with others. You yearn for a safe place, a community of friends who are hungry for God, who know what it means to sense the Spirit moving within them as they speak with you. You long for brothers and sisters who are intent not on figuring out how to improve your life, but on being with you wherever your journey leads. You want to know and be known in conversations that aren't really about you or anyone else but Christ."¹²

That is what I want for you, for me, and for us!

End Notes

¹ William Willimon, *What's Right with the Church*, p. 15

² George David, *The Eclipse and Rediscovery of Person*, p. 46

³ Ibid, p. 43,44

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 65

⁵ Ibid, p. 49

⁶ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for us: The Trinity and Christian Life* found in Todd Bolsinger, *It takes a Church to Raise a Christian*, p. 61

⁷ Bolsinger, *It takes a Church to Raise a Christian*, p. 42

⁸ Ibid, p.44

⁹ Paul Tournier, Source unknown

¹⁰ William Willimon, *What's Right with the Church*, p. 2-3

¹¹ Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, p. 102

¹² Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, p. 19

Chapter Two

Fulfilling God's Mission for the Church

A businessman friend and I were in a nearby restaurant. As we were leaving my friend struck up a brief conversation with a young family seated nearby. He finally asked them if they attended church anywhere and when they said they didn't, he asked if they knew of Southern Gables. Again when they said they didn't, he told them where it was located. I was standing close to the young father and I invited them to come sometime. The young man's response was a suddenly very unfriendly, conversation ending, "No!" Apparently the idea of attending a church evoked a strong response.

Why Church?

Why do you attend and even participate in a church? Why not the Masons, or Kiwanis, a camping/camper club, community theatre or choir, community athletics, or an avid professional sports fan? Before the Bronco's game last weekend, a fan was reported to have said, "Some people go to church; we come to the stadium for our tailgate party." I thought that fairly well captured a common perception of church: it is just one of many ways to accomplish the same things, only not as fun.

Why do people join groups?

- A place to meet others?
- A place where others accept you?
- A place where you can do something you enjoy?
- Maybe even a place where you can do something for others?
- A place where your kids can get involved in positive things instead of other negative activities out there?

Many organizations and activities can provide those benefits so why church? If we look merely at the activities or the benefits to ourselves we will miss the primary reason for church. The church is God's appointed means for accomplishing **God's** purpose in the world.

The church is God's appointed means for accomplishing God's purpose in the world.

First, what is God's purpose in the world? To restore His creation to its intended place. He created everything that exists, including and especially people and He did so that it might live in harmonious relationship with Himself for eternity.

- Genesis 1 – *"God created...and it was good."*
- Revelation 4:11 – *"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."*
- Psalm 91 – *"The heavens declare the glory of God."*
- 1 Corinthians 10:31 – *"Whatever you do, do all for the glory of God."*

The Westminster Catechism accurately sums it up this way: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."

But early in the biblical account of God's relationship with His creation, as early as Genesis 3, we learn that sin damaged, corrupted, and potentially completely destroyed God's creation including people. And unless God acted in creation's defense, saving it from itself, God's purpose and creation's good would be thwarted forever. And beginning with Genesis 3:15, we have in the Bible the plan of God to save His creation. The rest of Scripture—Genesis, Joshua,

Psalms, Isaiah, Malachi, Matthew, Romans, Galatians and Revelation—tells us how God is working out that plan. Remember I said, “The church is God’s appointed means for accomplishing God’s purpose in the world.” We looked first at His **purpose** in the world: To restore His creation to its intended place. A people who are, and a world that is, living in positive, loving relationship with Almighty God.

But now secondly we look at His **means**—how has God chosen to accomplish that purpose? In Genesis 12 we are told that God selected Abraham and blessed him so that he and the people from him, the people called Israel, would be the means to bring the people of the world back into right relationship with God. Genesis 12:3 says, *“and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*

Throughout the older testament—Genesis through Malachi—God reiterates His intention of using His chosen people to minister to the rest of the world. It is quite clear from the Bible that in many ways His chosen people failed at their task of representing God to the rest of the world, but God did not fail. In perfect timing that He controlled, He sent His Son to the world, through those chosen people. Jesus was born of Mary, an Israelite, and a descendant of Abraham. And why did Jesus come? To make possible the fulfillment of the same purpose for which He chose Abraham and the people of Israel. *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”* (John 3:17) And in the newer testament we see the plan of God unfolded further. What plan? His plan to rescue and restore His creation.

But now instead of using only one family line, only one race of people, God declares His intention of using a people drawn from every race to accomplish His purpose. In Revelation 5:9-10 we read, *“...with your blood you (Jesus)*

purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God..."

He created the church and He called it to the same purpose. The Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:8-11, "... Grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...**His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known...according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.**" (Emphasis Added) Peter said it this way: "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*" (1 Peter 2:9)

"The church is God's appointed means for accomplishing His purpose of saving His creation." This is huge! Do you see it in God's Word? Do you believe it? We, the church, are God's means for accomplishing His purpose of saving His creation. Someone has drawn a helpful distinction between a spiritual **activity** and a spiritual **task**: A spiritual **activity** will continue for eternity. We will always worship God—it is now one of the great activities of God's people and will be so on the new earth for eternity. But the **task** of saving God's creation will one day be completed.

- Worship is a spiritual **activity** that is ongoing.
- Missions is a spiritual **task** that has an end.
- Loving God and others is a spiritual **activity** that will go on forever.
- Helping people become faithful followers of Jesus is a **task** that will one day be completed.

Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. An individual's highest calling is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself. But the mission of the church, the purpose, or the calling of the church is a task. And what is that task, that mission? We've already seen it:

It is to be God's means to accomplish His purpose of saving His creation. Here's the way the Bible describes it. Jesus' purpose for being here was very clear. It was not just to die and rise again. His death and resurrection were instrumental to a different conclusion—to save His creation. But Jesus did not physically stay here, on earth, until the job was done. He clearly handed the task on to His disciples, to His church, and to us. Here's what He said:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18 - 20)

***We are to be God's means to accomplish
His purpose of saving His creation***

This has become known as the "great commission" for a reason. It is the single best summary of the mission, the task, given by Jesus, to His church, until He comes again.

Jesus said, *"Make disciples."* (A disciple is a follower, an imitator, one) who becomes like his master. We have tried to capture the essence of that commission in different words by saying it this way: Our mission is helping people become faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Did the disciples of Jesus understand that to be their mission? Did the believers, in those first years after Jesus went back to the

Father, understand that to be their mission? Listen again to the Apostle Paul:

"We proclaim (Jesus), admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me." (Colossians 1:28,29)

Paul said his mission was to help people become like Jesus—disciples—Christ-followers.

Or again in Ephesians 4:11-13 he says, *"It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ (the church) may be built up **until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.**"* (Emphasis Added)

Paul said the mission, the task, the goal of the church was to help people become like Jesus—disciples—faithful Christ-followers. Is that our intention as a church? Is that why you are part of a church? If we don't understand our God-given purpose, our mission, we will likely get bogged down in all kinds of lesser issues, usually revolving around how we aren't getting our needs met.

When is a Church Successful?

How do you judge a church successful or unsuccessful? I have quoted this before but a short article by Don Basham written several years ago has had a great impact on my thinking.

"Given the proper set of circumstances, any church can have what is popularly called a successful ministry. All he needs is a church location on the growing edge of the city

surrounded by middle income homes filled with middle income families who are eager to put down roots in their middle income suburb by joining all of the organizations representative of their middle income life.

“In such a situation, statistical success for a church is practically guaranteed. With a modest amount of loyal endeavor, there soon comes into being a growing congregation, lovely new church buildings, and an ever-swelling budget, all amidst a happy program of social and religious activity. Such churches dot the suburban landscape from coast to coast. Each one gives heed to the proven philosophy that to be successful the church must follow its flock to the suburbs where the sheep who have strayed from the downtown churches can be brought back into the fold.

“Yet in the midst of such easy success, there are danger signals flying everywhere. What passes for evangelism may be nothing more than combing the neighborhood for ready-made church members. The preoccupation with building programs and fat financial reports plus days and nights of thriving activity lull us into believing that the will of God is being fulfilled in people's lives simply because everything is going so well.

“I know because I was the minister in such a church for almost five years. Our people's enthusiasm over the church's statistical prospects was quite understandable, but after those five years I grew concerned with my failure to introduce a deeper spiritual life that would match the physical growth of the church and its facilities. In the midst of easy statistical success, spiritual truths become decidedly intangible.

"Generous hearted, loving and eager to be good church members, they were puzzled by my dissatisfaction with the way things were going. Spiritual self-discipline, power in prayer and an ever-increasing commitment to Jesus Christ were the things that I desperately wanted to impart but inevitably were crowded to one side. There was always the ever-present competition of the building program, developing property, raising money, and working to establish new committees and programs, to say nothing of the even more difficult task of harmonizing those programs already in operation. Of more immediate fascination than the power of God were the frequent announcements in the newspaper of proposed new subdivisions and plans for the extension of highways and public utilities into our neighborhood.

"I could not seem to keep our church from conforming to the image of just another successful suburban church. At times I even found my own prideful spirit smirking with satisfaction over our outward growth. But deep inside I knew I was responsible for developing a church disturbingly similar to the Laodicean church in Revelation who our Lord admonished saying, 'You say I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing. Not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.' "¹

I too have felt the concern and even the frustration expressed by Don Basham in the quote above. There are two very different ways of measuring the success of a church in America today. The first of them is to use the same gauges used to measure the success of any American enterprise, and many Christians use exactly those same measures. Thus, percentage of the market, rate of growth, and raw numbers are too often the measures of church greatness. And Christian news reports and magazine articles of successful churches, and even testimonies from

church leaders perpetuate that attitude across the country. Eugene Peterson put it this way, "Congregations get their ideas of what makes a (church and a) pastor from the culture, not from the Scriptures: they want a winner; they want their needs met; they want to be part of something zesty and glamorous. What congregations want is not pastors but managers of their religious companies."²

A successful church is a group of people (regardless of size) who are making definite strides in their Christ-following and who have a heart for both this community and the rest of the world.

And the methods for growth are modeled after corporate America and the already successful suburban churches in America today. Provide the right programs to meet the needs of the consumer-minded churchgoers and you will grow. It is the "church-growth" model of church management in America today. And success is measured in bodies, buildings and bucks.

A Better Way

When we read the New Testament we find, however, a different measure of success. It is a group of people (regardless of size) who are making definite strides in their Christ-following and who have a heart for both this community and the rest of the world. This second measure indicates no size or socio-economic status of people or church. The first measure of success used in some churches in America today in turn make them look more like corporations than communities of faith. The leadership methodology is more management than pastoral. The style is more image than substance.

We haven't been commissioned to:

- build an organization,
- or to have more members than a church down the street,
- or to raise a certain number of dollars.

We have been commissioned to make disciples.

Our vision—the picture we want of the future—isn't one of a larger facility, or a larger worship attendance, or of a bigger-than-anybody-else's youth group or choir, or a larger budget. Our vision is of a congregation, a community and a world of Christ-followers, because that is **the** mission. We will have accomplished our mission when the individuals of this congregation are faithfully following Jesus as evidenced by their love for Jesus, for each other and for others. That's why we preach, teach, and conduct Bible classes for children, youth and adults. That's why we encourage men and women and young people to get in smaller groups where true Christian fellowship can support us and sharpen us.

We will have accomplished our mission when every man, woman and child in this community is being prayed for, has heard of Jesus' love for them and has access to a church where they can participate in the mission. That's why we encourage being an intentional witness to Jesus' love. It's why we help plant new churches. If every church in our community was filled to capacity three times every Sunday morning, we couldn't accommodate even 15% of the population of SW Denver. We will have accomplished our mission when every people group in the world has a viable reproducing church movement. That's why we have sent our own family members and friends to Asia, Europe, South America and other far-flung places.

Why Church? Oh, it is about much more than what we do here in Sunday morning worship. What people typically call “church” is just the visible tip of the iceberg. It is a significant and happy part of what it means to be a church but it is only part.

Why Church?

Because we have a calling from God to be about our Father’s business of saving His creation.

Why Church?

Because we have been given a mission, a mission more important and more lasting than any other mission possible. And besides that we have been given a mission that can’t fail. Within weeks of the invasion of Europe on D-Day 1944 it was clear that the Allies would win World War II. But for nearly a year the victors took casualties as they moved East. But the outcome was certain—it was only a matter of time.

So it is with the mission God has given us—there is still a battle, but the outcome is certain—it is only a matter of time. Will you give your life to Jesus and the mission He has given us?

End Notes

¹ Don Basham, source unknown

² Eugene Peterson, *The Unnecessary Pastor*, p. 4

Chapter Three

God's Purpose In and Through Us

One of the great experiences of life is to hold a newborn child. A sense of awe and even joy moves over us as we look at that infant. But one of the saddest experiences of life is to see or even hold an eight-year-old child who is still infantile in size and ability. We delight in new birth but we grieve at severely stunted growth. Earlier I said that God is in the business of restoring His creation. God created the heavens and the earth and it was good. And God created Adam and Eve and they lived in an open, loving, fruitful relationship with their God. But sin corrupted that relationship and all of creation.

Speaking of all of creation except human beings, what to us is a beautiful and marvelous created world is a mere shadow of what God intended and what will be. At the same time we call this world beautiful we recognize that disease, destruction and death are also part of our world—witness a forest fire, a drought or a tsunami. Our world is not pristine and perfect. The Bible makes clear that what is needed is not a little change here and a little change there but a total renovation. The created world doesn't need just a little help but a total remaking. Romans 8:20-22 says, *"For the creation was subjected to frustration...We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (But) The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."*

And, 2 Peter 3:10,12-13 says, *"The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare...That day will*

bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

And what the rest of the created world needs is needed by human beings as well. Even while people enjoy family and friends, they suffer broken relationships, failing bodies, and the ever-present specter of death—witness divorce, cancer and child abuse. Our world is not pristine and perfect. Sin has so corrupted, so destroyed humanity that God is recreating it. Sin has so completely pervaded, so warped, so negatively changed every aspect of what it means to be human that God is in the business of remaking us—not just a snip here and a tuck there as if altering a garment, but a remaking, starting from scratch. We like to think we need only minor alterations to be what we were created to be but without God’s intervention we are much more like Hitler than we are like Jesus.

And so God starts over with us—Jesus called it being “born again.” In the emphasis on Christian “new birth,” however, many have relegated the idea of spiritual maturity to the place of “nice but not imperative.” But it is not God’s purpose to populate heaven, the new earth, with spiritual stillbirths and spiritual infants. His purpose is to recreate us and shape us to be like His Son, Jesus.

In Chapter Two I spoke of the purpose of the church. The church is God’s primary means for restoring His creation to wholeness. Now I speak of God’s primary purpose in and through each of us individually. God’s purpose is to restore each of us to wholeness and to be His instrument in restoring others. If we want to know what God’s goal for us looks like then look at Jesus. **When we think and act like Him, when we reflect His character, then we will**

have reached God's goal for us. That reshaping may not be completed until Jesus comes again but the Bible is clear, that is God's work in us now. And unlike some of us God is not pessimistic about His transforming work in our lives. Paul writes:

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

When we think and act like Him, when we reflect His character, then we will have reached God's goal for us

"...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)
And what does it mean to be like Jesus? Several times in the Bible descriptions of the re-created person are given:

- Galatians 5:22-23 – *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."*
- 2 Peter 1:5-7 – *"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love."*
- Matthew 22:37-39 – *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."*

An old term for becoming like Christ is the term "spiritual formation." One author describes this becoming-like-Christ this way: "Spiritual formation is the progressive patterning

of a person's inner and outer life according to the image of Christ..."¹

Has that been accomplished in your life?

Is God finished with you?

Is God finished with your spouse and your children?

Is God finished with your friends?

Is God finished with your neighbor?

Spiritual formation is the progressive patterning of a person's inner and outer life according to the image of Christ

As I said earlier, some of us have relegated spiritual growth to the "nice but not imperative" category. Does it matter if nothing changed about your spiritual condition until the day you die? Yes, it matters because if nothing changed it would mean that God's primary purpose in your life would be aborted. Yes, it matters because it would mean that there is probably no spiritual life.

Hear how seriously God takes the issue of spiritual growth:

"See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first." (Hebrews 3:12-14)

"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from

accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.”(Colossians 1:21-23)

“...without holiness no one will see the Lord.”(Hebrews 12:14 – all emphasis added)

I do not believe in the doctrine popularly defined as “eternal security.” If there is no evidence of growth it is probably because there is no growth and where there is no growth there is no life. The Bible teaches the doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints.” What God starts, He finishes. God’s goal for our lives is not a “get out of jail free” card that we redeem at death. His goal is not to simply keep us out of hell. His goal is our re-creation—restoring us to the humanity He intended in creation and the full humanity that is manifested in the person and life of Jesus.

Jesus said in Matthew 28:19—20, *“Therefore go and make disciples... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”* A disciple is an imitator—one who becomes like his master. Jesus said in Matthew 10:25, *“It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.”* The destiny of every believer, of every spiritual rebirth, then is to become like Jesus, a disciple.

Galatians 4:19 – *“My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...”*

Colossians 1:28 – *“We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.”*

Ephesians 4:13 – Paul’s mission was to be God’s instrument in people until we *“become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”*

And the purpose of the church—our purpose collectively

and individually—is helping people become like Jesus: faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

If helping people become like Jesus is the church's and our individual responsibility, it seems reasonable to ask how we do that. It seems quite obvious that attending worship services and giving, even generously, don't sufficiently address the responsibility. It seems equally obvious that teaching a class, singing on a worship team, or helping out with Boy's Brigade don't sufficiently address the responsibility. The example of Jesus and the evidence of history tell us that making disciples—helping people become faithful followers of Jesus—is far more **individual** and even far more **intimate** than simply participating in a program. Again Paul said it this way in Galatians 4:19, "*My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...*" It is personal and it is intimate.

***The purpose of the church is helping
people become like Jesus: faithful
followers of Jesus Christ.***

What does it mean to labor for someone until Christ is formed in him or her? Paul's choice of the childbirth metaphor was not accidental. His concern for those people's spiritual growth was intense, it was urgent, it was with difficulty, it was with single-mindedness and it was with a very definite goal in mind. Paul fought for their souls. Is that happening in your life?

A younger pastor from a large church in our city called and asked to meet. His wife was struggling so severely from depression that he didn't know if he could hold his family together. He was struggling in his soul to be a godly husband in the midst of his situation. He didn't put it in

these words, but he was asking me to fight for his soul!

I have a friend in this church who struggles with a health issue in his family and a pressure-cooker job so that many days he's depleted emotionally and physically leading to a real spiritual battle in his own soul. There are days he nearly despairs, nearly giving up on life and God.

How many in our church are beaten down by life and are close to having no hope? Who is fighting for their souls? How many others are "fat, dumb and happy" but a discerning eye can see the trap into which they are headed? Who is fighting for their souls? Paul knew that the battle for our souls is deadly serious—the enemy of our souls is unrelenting, powerful, cunning and deadly. Here's the way God says it:

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12)

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul." (1 Peter 2:11)

The war against our souls is intentional and deadly, and so the fight for our souls must be equally intentional and life giving. The fight for our souls is also intensely personal and individual. Again Paul wrote in Philippians 2:20, *"I have no one else like (Timothy), who takes a genuine interest in your welfare."*

And of Jonathan and David's relationship we read in 1 Samuel 18:1ff:

"After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as

himself... And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself."

That younger pastor, I mentioned earlier, asked if I would meet with him regularly. I felt very inadequate, knowing the condition of my own soul, but I realized what I was being asked to do was to care and contend for his soul.

Two years ago and for a period of over a year I was in one of those times of life that are particularly difficult. Several in this congregation made a commitment to fight for my soul. Sure it's embarrassing to be weak and especially to be struggling so long—never seeming to get past it or getting it fixed. But they have made a commitment and have kept it.

What did they do for me and what do you do for someone for whose soul you are fighting? The staff here at SGC discussed this question and two phrases surfaced: To fight for the soul of someone includes

- Interceding for them in prayer, and
- Interacting with them in the Word.

Prayer

Who prays for you and whom do you pray for? Romans 15:30-32 says, *"I urge you, brothers...to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me."*

And Colossians 4:12-13 reads, *"Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he has a deep concern for you..."*

A couple of months ago someone on our staff brought this verse to our attention again and said:

- Look at the frequency of Epaphras' prayers for them—always.

- Look at the intensity of his prayers for them—wrestling, agonizing.
- Look at the goal of his prayers for them—that they may stand firm and mature.
- Look at the motivation for his prayers for them—deep concern, love.

In 2 Timothy 1:2,3 Paul said, *"Timothy, my dear son, night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers."* To the people of Colosse he wrote, *"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you..."*

There is a difference between those who say they pray and those who do pray, between those who pray once or occasionally and those who pray constantly

I sense the difference between those who say they pray and those who do pray, between those who pray once or occasionally and those who pray constantly. Those who pray constantly are fighting for my soul. My wife Barbara and several others continue to pray for me—their prayers are a defensive weapon wielded on behalf of my soul.

This intercession for them in prayer is not only constant but it has content. Colossians 1:10ff says,
"...Asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and

joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light."

Not only is our intercession for them in prayer constant and with content but also it is confident.

"On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many." (2 Corinthians 1:9ff)

***God made us to live in relationship
with Him and His church***

This is a matter of faith. Will I believe God's word that my prayers make a difference?

The Word

Fighting for the soul of another not only includes intercession for them in prayer but it also includes interaction with them in the Word. There is a "with-ness" in Christianity that is foreign to many of us. Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzeneger and Steven Segal are not role models for spiritual warfare. The go-it-alone, Lone Ranger, Christian will fall. God made us to live in relationship with Him and His church. God intended that we grow and live the Christian life together.

"I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." (Romans 1:11-12)

Look at the "one anothers" in the Bible:

"Wash one another's feet" – John 13:14

"Love one another" – John 13:34

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love" – Romans

12:10

"Give preference to one another" – Romans 12:10

"Build up one another" – Romans 14:10

"Accept one another" – Romans 15:7

"Admonish one another" – Romans 15:14

"Bear one another's burdens" – Galatians 6:2

"Be kind to one another" – Ephesians 4:31

"Forgive one another" – Ephesians 4:32

"Regard one another as more important than yourself" – Phil. 2:3

"Teach one another" – Colossians 3:16

"Encourage one another" – 1 Thessalonians 5:11

"Stimulate one another to love and good deeds" – Hebrews 10:24

"Pray for one another" – James 5:16

"Serve one another" – 1 Peter 4:10

In isolation, our souls will dry up. We need each other. My friend and I meet, e-mail, phone, and we don't let the conversation stay superficial but engage each other in what matters—the things of our souls. Jim Means and I have that kind of relationship.

But interaction alone is not sufficient. There are many who are good friends. But the kind of interaction that fights for our souls is centered in the Word. It is God's **Word** that God's **Spirit** uses in the context of God's **people** that makes the difference in our lives. It means that the Scriptures inform our interaction. When we get serious it is truth from God's word that we bring to bear on the situations and decisions of life. The counsel to one another is not man's wisdom but God's wisdom because the Bible informs it.

Who is interacting with you, centered in the Word? Who's fighting for your soul? Who's soul are you fighting for? I

grieve when I think of how many men and women have no one who cares for them personally, cares for their soul. 350 years ago Richard Baxter wrote, "The whole of our ministry must be carried on in tender love to people. We must let them see that nothing pleases us but what profits them; and that what does them good does us good; and that nothing troubles us more than their hurt. We must feel toward people, as a father toward his children; yet, the tenderest love of a mother must not surpass ours. We must even travail in birth, til Christ be formed in them. They should see that we care for no outward thing, neither wealth, nor liberty, nor honor, nor life, in comparison to (our care for) their (souls)."²

My desire is that every one of us would have at least one other person who is fighting for our soul and that every one of us would be fighting for the souls of specific others. God's goal for us is our re-creation—God's purpose is that we be restored to the full humanity that is seen in His Son, Jesus. His goal is that we become like Christ.

Is that your goal? Is that your mission in the lives of those God puts in your life?

End Notes

¹ Melvin Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation*, p. 15

² Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, p. 117

Chapter Four

Fighting for Someone's Soul

In addressing the subject of the purpose of the church, I wish to spend more time on describing what it means to fight for someone's soul. As I have experienced it and thought about it there are both attitudes and actions that make up "fighting for someone's soul." Let's first look at some of the attitudes involved.

Caring

It starts with simply caring—caring what is happening in someone's soul. We use the word "soul" quite intentionally because it speaks of that which is most us. We are material and immaterial—we are talking about that immaterial part of us that is the eternal us. Our bodies as they now exist aren't eternal but our souls are—people are eternal. Do I care what is happening on the inside of a person? Do I care that their soul is growing or dying? Can I see past the exterior and genuinely care what is happening to the soul of a person? I look at my own children and my wife and I deeply care what is happening to them. Not just their health, jobs, and happiness but what is happening in their souls. Are they becoming more like Christ?

But what about others? Paul wrote to the Galatians, *"My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you..."* (4:19) And, *"My dear children..."* It was with deep fatherly affection and concern that he labored over them; his heart was moved for them, his life was given for them.

I sat down in a restaurant recently and couldn't help but notice a very unattractive person seated nearby. The face was especially large, fat and slightly distorted. The rest of the body matched and the clothes were unkempt. As I sat there I tried to look past the sloppy and slightly dirty clothes, past the unappealing exterior and tried to look deeply inside. I saw a person, a person with feelings, with longings, with dreams, but no doubt with pain, maybe great pain—a human being, a soul, a person made in the image of God but, as with all of us, deeply fallen.

How do I see others? Do I see a person, made in the image of God deeply scarred by sin but in whom God is working to remake them? Or do I write people off. I talk with someone who is destroying his own life and the lives of others around him and part of me wants to give up. I'm tempted to say they're impossible and they're getting what they deserve. Then I remember Paul's words: "*My dear children...*" "Yes, we see people as sinners but that does not mean we write them off—it means we see them as one of us—as one author put it: "wonderfully made, yes, deeply fallen but greatly loved."

God give me compassion, a heart for people, people whose souls I can fight for

Another author put it this way: "To see a person as a sinner, then is not to see him or her as hypocritical, disgusting or evil. Most sinners are very nice people. To call a man a sinner is not a blast at his manners or his morals. It is a theological belief that the one thing he needs most is forgiveness and grace.

"If we rigorously define people as fellow sinners, we will be prepared to share grief, shortcomings, pain, failure, and

have plenty of time left over to watch for the signs of God's grace operating in this wilderness, and then fill the air with praises for what we discover... So "sinner" becomes not a weapon in the arsenal of condemnation but the expectation of grace."¹ I must care! "God give me compassion, a heart for people, for specific people—people whose souls I can fight for."

Intentionality

I must know what I am fighting for. The Bible puts it this way: "*until Christ is formed in you.*" How many times have you heard a variation on: "What I want for my children is their happiness."

"Mom, do you think I should get married?"

"Mom, do you think I should have a baby, take that new job, get divorced?"

"Whatever will make you happy, honey."

As I listen to many prayers it would seem that what we want most for those we care about are healthy bodies, material prosperity, and enjoyable relationships. If we pray at all for other people it is only after they are sick, have lost their job, or are having difficulty in their marriage or with a child. Is there a verse in the Bible that says, "Without happiness no one will see the Lord?" No, but there is one that says, "*Without holiness no one will see the Lord.*" (Hebrews 12:14)

What do you want most for your children? I have heard hundreds of parents stand before this congregation and in profound and poignant ways state their desire for their children's spiritual welfare. Was that just empty rhetoric or were they vowing to fight for the souls of their children and

were they inviting us to join them in that fight? I think their vows and pleas were genuine but many of us so easily slip into only the here and now that we lose perspective on the eternal. It takes a recalibration of our hearts and minds to see the important once again.

What is God's goal for my child's life, my spouse's life, my friend's life, my neighbor's life? We are stewards not only of our own lives but also of the lives He has entrusted to us—our own families first and then the community of faith (the people of our church) and then those with whom we live and work. Beyond that, God says I also have a responsibility to the people of the world. God says, "*You are not your own; you were bought at a price.*" (1 Corinthians 6:19,20)

What do you want for the people you love most deeply?
What do you want for your best friends?

- The Apostle John, as an old man wrote in 3 John 4, "*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*"
- Paul wrote in Galatians 4:19, "*My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...*"

Happiness is not what I want most for my children—I want holiness for them. I want for them the fruit of the Spirit: "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*" (Galatians 5:22-23)

I want for them what Peter wanted for those he loved: "*For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly*

kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.” (2 Peter 1:5-7)
I want for them what Jesus said is the greatest commandment and the second greatest commandment: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Matthew 22:37-39)

Awareness

In fighting for someone’s soul it not only starts with caring for them and then intentionality—knowing what we are fighting for, but it must include awareness—awareness of what God is doing in that person’s life now. If you were running an organization or a program you could lay out a plan and work the plan. But if you are fighting for the soul of a person it is much less systematic than that, in fact it is usually quite messy because life is messy.

Therefore in fighting for the soul of another I should ask, as one author suggested,

- “What is God doing in this person’s life right now? What has God set in motion that I can get in on?”²
- What are they going through right now?
- How specifically can I pray for them in their present situation?

So “fighting for someone’s soul” is not nearly so much laying out a plan as it is being aware of where God has them right now and how we can come alongside them to cooperate with God in their life.

Most of us would probably agree that the times of greatest growth in our lives have not come in a classroom but in a crisis. Suffering seems to be a much better teacher than success. If I believe nothing comes into our lives but what God allows, then I must also believe that God would use

those circumstances, good or bad, to accomplish His purpose in our lives. And so we watch and when our friend is weak and poor we pray for them for strength and provision and when they are strong and rich we pray for them for humility and generosity. We ask, "What word of encouragement or exhortation would be most appropriate in this situation?" "How can I demonstrate a genuine concern and love for them in these circumstances?"

Patience

The fourth attitude must be one of patience. Fighting for someone's soul is not a matter of a quick prayer, a week's attention, a passing interest, but is a matter of a lifetime. There must be a patience and persistence in following through even with those who waiver for a season. Change

Do I trust that God will work in this person's life and will I wait with God?

is usually almost imperceptible. Day after day we can ask our children what they learned in school that day and almost invariably they will say, "Nothing." But amazingly over months and years, they learn much. Do I trust that God will work in this person's life and will I wait with God?

How Does It Work?

Now with some of the attitudes that form the foundation of fighting for the soul of another, I wish to address the "how to." What does fighting for someone's soul look like? Earlier I described the fight for someone's soul is to:

Intercede for someone in prayer

Interact with someone in the Word.

Scripture gives us many references on interceding for someone in prayer. Jesus said, "*Simon, Simon, Satan has*

asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.”(Luke 22:31)

The Old Testament prophet Samuel said, *“As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.”(1 Samuel 12:23)*

God said of Job, *“My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly.”(Job 42:8)*

Interacting with someone from the Word looks like the kind of interaction that fights for our souls, centered in the Word. It is God’s Word that God’s Spirit uses in the context of God’s people that makes the difference in our lives. It means that the Scriptures inform our interaction. When we get serious it is truth from God’s word that we bring to bear on the situations and decisions of life. The counsel to one another is not man’s wisdom but God’s wisdom because the Bible informs it.

Many of us in this church have a vision for this church—a vision of what this church could look like. It includes the following:

- Every believer is fighting for his or her own soul using the means of grace that God has given us: the Word, prayer, fellowship, worship, service, giving, etc.
- Dads and moms are intentionally fighting for the souls of their children. That in addition to providing shelter, sustenance, education, and recreation, every parent would see the far more important soul of their child as worthy of fighting for.
- Every believer is “fighting for the souls” of specific others.

We want it to be true that five years from today or sooner that every person in this church who is willing would be able to say I know who is fighting for my soul and could be able to say specifically whose souls they are fighting for. Every leader and teacher in the church is not just running programs or teaching lessons but is consciously fighting for the souls of those in the group.

We are God's instruments, God's means for the most important work ever in a person's life—becoming more like Jesus

We are God's instruments, God's means for the most important work ever in a person's life—becoming more like Jesus. The measure of our success will not be in numbers but in spiritual formation; Is Christ being formed in the people for whom we are responsible?

Our vision is

- organism not organization,
- corporate not corporation,
- sacramental not institutional,
- pastoral not professional,
- called not driven,
- and mentored not managed.

We haven't been commissioned to build an organization or to have more members than a church down the street—we have been commissioned to make disciples. We have been commissioned to see Christ formed in the people of this church, this community and this world. My vision is to see Christ formed in you and me. To do that we must fight for each other's souls—we need each other.

I have paraphrased a charge from Eugene Peterson to pastors—but as I have paraphrased it, it applies to all of us in our relationships with each other. Read this as your own plea to someone else to fight for your soul and as a description of your responsibility in fighting for someone else's soul:

"I need your help in keeping my beliefs sharp and accurate and intact. I don't trust myself; my emotions seduce me into infidelities. I know I am launched on a difficult and dangerous act of faith in life, and there are strong influences intent on diluting or destroying it. I need your help. Let God speak through you into all the different parts and stages of my life – in my work and play, with my children and my parents, at birth and death, in my celebrations and sorrows, on those days when morning breaks over me in a wash of sunshine, and those other days that are all drizzle.

"This isn't the only task in the life of faith, there are other things to be done but this task is vitally important for my soul. One more thing: This is not a temporary job assignment for you but a way of life that I need lived out day after day. I know you are launched on the same difficult belief venture in the same dangerous world as I am. I know your emotions are as fickle as mine and your mind is as tricky as mine. That is why I am asking you to commit to this. I know there will be days and months, maybe even years, when I won't feel like believing anything and won't want to hear it from you. And I know there will be days and weeks and even years when you won't feel like saying it. It doesn't matter. Do it. You are called to this role in my life.

“Promise right now that you won’t give in to my reluctance and resistance. You are not the servant of my changing desires or my time-conditioned understanding of my needs, or my secularized hopes for something better.

“There are many other things to be done in this wrecked world, and I am responsible for doing at least some of them, but if I am not reminded of the foundational realities with which we are dealing – God, kingdom, gospel – I am going to end up living a futile, fantasy life. Your task, in my life, is to keep telling the basic story, representing the presence of the Spirit, insisting on the priority of God, and speaking the biblical words of command and promise and invitation.”³

Will you fight for my soul?

End Notes

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*

² Ibid

³ Paraphrased from *The Contemplative Pastor*

Church—Why bother? Most of us long to be different and to have our lives changed. According to God’s word, the change we long for and the relationships we covet are found in the church because that is the way God made us. Christianity is not only a private affair between God and the individual. We are converted, save and born again into a community—a community of faith, the body of Christ, the Church. Come, join the community of God—The Church!