

So how can we become compassionate? Compassion grows out of actions (Lk 10.37). We grow compassionate as we treat others with kindness. We can start by doing good (i.e., giving to meet needs) to everybody, including our enemies (Lk 6.27-38). When the opportunity arises, "do good to all men, especially them of the household of faith" (Gal 6.10). "Give to *everyone* who asks of you" (v. 30) and "lend, expecting nothing in return" (v. 35). Recognize that people will use you, just as they use God (v. 35). But recognize also that everything you are doing is seen by the All-Knowing God. He will richly bless you for it (vv. 35, 38). Make it your ambition to treat others just like God does (v. 35). Consider how you would like to be treated, and then act in that same way (v. 31). *We grow compassionate as we see the spiritual needs of others* (Mt. 9.36). Jesus was greatly burdened by the terrible spiritual condition of the people. All of Jesus' compassionate works were in conjunction with His teaching ministry. It was while He was teaching about salvation that He fed the 5,000, healed all the sick, lame, blind and demon-possessed. We must never divorce our compassionate deeds from our witness for Christ. Indeed, every time we do something for someone, we ought to also speak to them about Christ. Real compassion moves us to pray for reapers in spiritual work (Mt 9.38). *We grow compassionate as we meditate upon the good qualities of others* (Pr 1.3-8). Pray for others (v. 4). Give thanks to God for them (v. 3). Rejoice in their salvation (vv. 4-5). Accept by faith that God is working in their lives-and will continue to work-to make them better Christians (v. 6). Recognize that all believers are one body in Christ. What is good for one is good for all. And that whatever thing God is doing in our lives will ultimately be a blessing for them, too (vv. 7-8). *We help others grow compassionate as we live Biblically*. The way we live our lives can result in the brethren growing in compassion towards all the brethren (Phm 7). Our love for the Lord (Phm 7), and our obedience to the Word of God causes others to grow in their compassions towards us (2Co 7.15) as does treating others with a deep and sincere respect (v. 15). Standing by the brethren during their trials and afflictions produces heartfelt compassion in their hearts for us (Pr 1.7).

Here are some things to consider regarding compassion. *Plan to help others.*

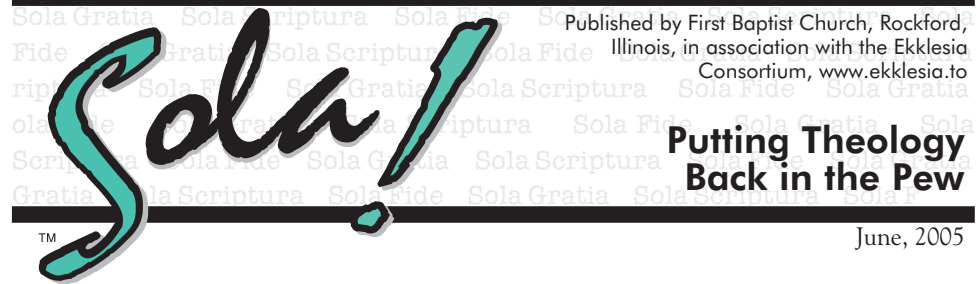
Helping others in their need will give you an opportunity to witness for Christ and will of tentimes build a bridge for future ministry with them. *Do something, even if it is just a little* (Lk 6.30). Sometimes people will request something from you that you cannot do; you simply don't have the resources to meet all their needs. In such cases, if you do at least a little bit for them, it will be appreciated and again, it will help build a bridge for future ministry. Small things count, too-even a drink of water

We grow compassionate as we see the spiritual needs of others.

(Mt 10.42). *Don't lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary* (Gal 6.9). Make this your lifelong ambition. Don't worry about "having enough." God will make sure you have plenty for yourself and others (Pr 11.25). Everybody ought to be a giver (Eph 4.28). Remember, all you do, Jesus will repay (Lk 6.38). You cannot out-give God. *Recognize that how you respond to this teaching has great spiritual impact upon your life* (Gal 6.6-10). Yes, your spiritual blessedness is directly affected by your financial sowing (vv. 7-8). It is imperative that you do your part to take care of your pastor (v. 6). You should also be very concerned about the welfare of your brothers and sisters in Christ (v. 10). But we must not neglect the unsaved, either (v. 10). Remember the Good Samaritan (Lk 10.25-37). In fact, if anyone refuses to help a suffering brother or sister, it ought to cause that one to question his own salvation (Jas 2.14-17), because "pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father [is] to visit orphans and widows in their distress" (Jas 1.27).

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Putting Theology Back in the Pew

June, 2005

The Gospel and the Visible Church

Jason Parker

The visible local church languishes today in the affections of many a believer. After all, it certainly seems to be full of problems—divisions, quarrels, confusions, worldliness. It seems much easier to flit about in an ethereal church, unencumbered with the mundane realities of human society. Why should we commit ourselves to fellowship with such a society as the visible local church?

Today it seems that many professing believers have no idea why they must be an active member of a visible local church. Few realize that one's relationship with God is not merely an individual matter. Today, private devotions are thought to be indispensable to one's spiritual life, while at the same time the weightiness of the corporate worship of God's people is negligible. Personal disciple-making is in vogue, but many are ignorant of the necessity of body life to the disciple-making enterprise. More than a few professing believers today believe that they can have a healthy spiritual life and active service for God without membership in the local church. Para-church evangelistic and discipleship "ministries" are all the rage, apparently because they are deemed more effective than the humdrum of life in the local body. All these indications point toward a profound ignorance of God's plan of redemption, and the cause of the gospel cannot help but suffer for it in the long run. This generation needs a fresh realization of the inseparable connection between the gospel and the visible church.

On a very basic level, we can say that there is a twofold relationship between the gospel and the visible church. First, the gospel is the

instrument which the Spirit uses to form the church. Second, the church is the instrument which upholds and propagates the gospel. The gospel and the church are interrelated and interdependent. One does not function in isolation from the other. Let's explore some biblical evidence for these assertions.

The Gospel Produces the Church The end result of the preaching of the gospel is not an unaffiliated gathering of individual believers. Rather, it is the formation of the body of Christ. Christ intended to "reconcile us ... to God in one body," and he does this "through the cross" (Eph 2.16). When one responds to the gospel message in faith and repentance, he instantaneously becomes a "fellow citizen with the saints" and a "member of the household of God" (Eph 2.19). He becomes another build-

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ing block in the holy dwelling place of God (Eph 2.20-22), which is the church. By observing God's revealed plan of redemption, we can see that it is intrinsically designed to produce the body of Christ, the church.

It is important to realize at this point that the body of Christ is not only universal or "invisible," although this is certainly one of its facets. It does include all the redeemed of this dispensation whether in heaven or on earth. Therefore, no man can see the body of Christ in its full extent. However, we can see the body of Christ in its contemporary expression. It is something visible, composed of living human beings who by divine instruction operate together to accomplish God's purposes. The NT usually uses the term "church" to speak of

this visible body. Therefore, it is inconsistent to claim membership in the universal body of Christ without expressing that through membership in a visible, local body.

Not only is it inconsistent, it is disobedient. The first command that a believer receives from his newfound Lord is the command to identify with Him publicly in baptism. It is the first step of being a disciple (Mt 28.19; Ac 22.16). Conversion and baptism are so closely linked in the NT that baptism can be taken as shorthand for the whole conversion event in a believer's life (Ac 2.38; Ro 6.3-4). Paul appeals to water baptism as an event which every believer shares (Eph 4.5). Baptism is a visible symbol of what has transpired spiritually—the placing of the believer into membership in the body of Christ. It is the unavoidable nexus which brings the unseen membership in the body of Christ into the visible realm. As such, baptism is the initiatory rite into membership in the local, visible church. The NT knows nothing of an unbaptized, unaffiliated believer. Thus anyone who avoids baptism and the consequent membership in a visible assembly of believers is disobedient to the Lord and calls into question the legitimacy of his conversion.

So we can see that the outworking of God's plan of salvation in the life of an individual leads inexorably to membership in a local assembly of believers. The gospel is the instrument which produces the visible church.

The Church Propagates the Gospel In Christ's Great Commission, the command is to make disciples. This command is accomplished by means of going, baptizing, and teaching (Mt 28.19-20), which clearly implies the activity of a functioning group of believers. As the NT unfolds, we find that it is the local, visible church which sends people to go (Ac 13.3) and supplies for their needs as they do so (1Co 9.3-14; Php 4.10-20). It is the local church which administers the ordinance of baptism, and it is the local church in which God gives gifts and leaders for the edifying of believers (1Co 12; Eph 4.11-16). Thus, although the church is never mentioned by name in the Great Commission, it is clear that the visible church is indispensable to the mission.

Later on in the NT, the local church is called "the pillar and support of the truth"

(1Ti 3.15). This is an important text for understanding the relationship between God's revealed truth and his church. The text does not say that the church is the originator or the arbiter of truth. It is, however, God's intended means of propagating and defending his truth. People do not hear the gospel from an invisible church. This places the visible church in the center of God's agenda—a place every believer should want to be.

If we downplay the local visible church, we will drag down the gospel mission with it.

Thus when Abraham Lincoln said in 1846, "I am not a member of any Christian church, but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures," (cited by Nathan O. Hatch, "Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum," in *The Bible in America*, p. 59) he was not entirely accurate. By not being a member of a Christian church, he was implicitly denying what the Scriptures teach. When modern believers ask, "Why must I channel my service for the Lord through an organized local assembly?" The answer is that the local, visible church is God's functional means of upholding and spreading the faith of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1.27 says that as visible bodies we are to strive together for the faith, which is the gospel. The apostle Paul aptly describes this as "partnership in the gospel" (Php 1.5). That is the function of a local church. God has no plan B for promoting the gospel, despite the current fascination with para-church approaches to evangelism and discipleship.

Conclusion Although we do not wish to repeat the Roman Catholic error that the church dispenses salvation, neither do we wish to sever the gospel from the church as if there were no relationship between the two. The gospel and the church exist in a symbiotic relationship in God's great plan. If we downplay the local visible church, we will drag down the gospel mission with it. As fundamentalists whose hearts beat to see the gospel spread, let us not be guilty of trying to do it better than God, so to speak. Let us put our disciple making efforts into building up and reproducing visible churches. The gospel is a

beautiful message designed to produce a beautiful bride. Let us love them both.

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A Heart of Compassion

Steven Owen

The greatest blessing in the universe is to be like Jesus Christ (Ro 8.28-29). In comparison to Christ, everything else in life is "but dung" (Pr 3.8). Thankfully, God's plan is to make you like Christ (Ro 8.29). But He has commanded you to work with Him (Pr 3.12-13). He has commanded you to make Christlikeness the goal of your life (Co. 3.1) and the continual pursuit of all your efforts (Col 3. 2). The believing response to these truths is to apply "all diligence" (2Pe 1.5) to become like our Lord. What, then, is the first thing we should do to become more Christ-like? Colossians chapters three and four outline the process for us. After putting off the garments of sin, the first step to putting on Christ is in the area of compassion. We are commanded to put on "bowels of mercy" (Col 3.12). Let's examine the Scripture to determine what that would mean for us.

To the Greek reader of Paul's day, the seat of the emotions was not the heart but the bowels. They spoke this way because when something bad happened, they literally felt upset in their stomach. No doubt you yourself have experienced hearing or seeing some tragedy, and immediately you felt some kind of discomfort in your stomach. What the Holy Spirit is commanding, then, is that we feel the hurts and needs of others as if they were our own. It is this garment of compassion that we must put on to start becoming like Christ. "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22.39).

If we search the Bible for the term here translated "mercy" in both the OT and NT, we discover that the word is used some 111 times. Shockingly, it is used of people having or lacking compassion only 7 times. The other 104 times it is used of God, and of those 104 times, 6 times it is used of God no longer having compassion on His people because they had left Him for idols. But the other 98 times, it is used of the compassionate character of God. From this you can easily see that the overwhelming number of references to compassion in the Bible are used to describe the character of God.

Our God is a compassionate God. In fact, He is the source of all the compassion that exists in the universe (2Co 1.3).

Here's what compassion looks like. *True compassion is heart broken over the eternal destiny of sinners.* It is the compassion of God that moved Him to save rebellious sinners like us (Ro 12.1). It is God's compassion that breaks His heart over the rebellious sins of Israel (Hos 11.8) and prevented Him from utterly casting them away (Hos 11.9-11). Compassion ought to move us to beg God for reapers in His harvest (Mt 9.38). *True compassion meets the pressing physical needs of people.* Our God does good to everyone, including evil and ungrateful men (Lk 6.35). Compassion moved Jesus to "heal their sick" (Mt 14.13-14) and feed the five thousand (Mt 15.32). It was compassion that moved Jesus to give sight to the blind (Mt 20.34) and cleanse lepers (Mk 1.40-41). *True compassion empathizes with those in need.* Empathy is to completely identify with the needs and suffering of others. Jesus Himself was physically affected by the suffering He encountered. When He saw the multitudes, He was "moved with compassion" for them (Mk 6.34). "He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled" over the death of Lazarus (Jn 11.35). "Jesus wept" (v. 35) and was "deeply moved within" (v. 38) when He saw the grief of Lazarus' sisters. We could define *Biblical compassion as the deep feeling of suffering the spiritual and physical needs of others that moves us to try to meet those needs.*

It is essential that we put on compassion. The Lord desires "mercy, and not sacrifice" (Mt 9.13). No doubt God desires our worship (Jn 4.23), but worship without compassion is rejected (Mt 9.11-13). One sure sign that churches lack compassion is the feuding going on within them (1Pe 3.8-12). A lack of compassion prevents the brethren from being united in mind, love and purpose (Pr. 2.2). It is a lack of compassion that fuels the nit-picking and gossip against the pastor (2Co 6.12) and other members of the family of God (Pr 4.2). A lack of compassion prevents forgiveness (Mt 18.27-35), leads to a grieved Spirit within the church (Mt 18.31), prevents our prayers from being answered (1Pe 3.12), and if not repented of, merits God's judgment (Mt 18.34-35). But if we confess and forsake our sin God will again have mercy upon us (Pr 28.13).