

It Takes A Church

Why the Church Is Necessary

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You'll probably remember that a year or so ago our illustrious first lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, came out with a book about raising children and child care, and for its title she borrowed an African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." Of course she used just the first part of that, *It Takes A Village*. I'm not recommending the book, or endorsing the proverb in any way, but I'm going to use the principle of it as the basis for this sermon, which I have titled *It Takes A Church*.

When I went through Ambassador College, Carn Catherwood, if you remember him, taught a class called "Christian Leadership," and as I recall it was one of the more popular classes that they offered there one semester. The reason why it was so popular was that it gave us students an idea of how we could serve in the local church area when we went back. Most of us in the time that I went through weren't going to be picked up by the church as ministers. As a matter of fact it was probably more than likely that if you were a woman going to Ambassador College you had a better chance of getting a job on campus than a man.

We knew that we were going to go home and help, and people were going to look to us as Ambassador College graduates, and we should thereby use our education that we had gotten, partly at the church's expense, to serve in the local area as best we could. One of the foundational principles Mr. Catherwood taught us is the idea that the church functions as a support for the individual Christian.

For instance, when a woman is left a widow, the number of people supporting her is greatly diminished. Normally her greatest support is her husband, and depending on what her family situation is like, other family members, she may have no other means of support than the church. If she has no children, or her children are grown, she's all by herself really in certain areas, in certain respects, and the church should be the one that she turns to for help. Now if she's in the situation and the church is not acting as her support, and let's say a crisis occurs, her washing machine goes out and nobody is around to fix it, and she doesn't have the money on her Social Security check to call an expensive appliance repairman, well, she needs somebody to help, and that is one of the functions of the church.

If she is a member of God's church of course, a part of God's family, the scenario that I just described need never occur. She may have lost a husband, and that's a grievous

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thing of course, but she should have many brothers and sisters that should spring to her aid whenever she has a need. The church is like a large loving family, ...or should be.

In her case it should function as a replacement family, a support, a lifeboat, a help in time of need, a refuge from the storm, a source of wisdom and knowledge for living our lives according to God's way, and a handout whenever it's needed. What I feel is that the church is a necessary part of not only helping us physically, but leading us to salvation, ...and thus the title, *It Takes A Church*.

A problem many have, however, is that this idea of the church being a support group, let's say, for lack of a better term, is that this goes counter to the trend in society. Over the past century or so this country has gone from a family oriented agrarian society, where everyone pitches in and it's no shame to seek and receive help from one's family, to an individual oriented high-tech society, where it is thought to be a noble and much desired virtue to be self-reliant.

A fundamental change has taken place in the way we live, to separate and isolate people from larger entities, especially the family. Various factors, like easy and rapid transportation and communication and huge national and international corporations send people hither and yon all over the face of the globe, away from their natural support. I mean, who lives in his home town anymore?—because maybe his job has better prospects somewhere else. Well, that's just how life is these days.

We've gone from an "all for one and one for all" society to a "I am a rock, I am an island" society. It's a little bit ironic that the "One World" movement that is going on out there is occurring during such a time of extreme individualism. Maybe it's because we've been taken away from our moorings that people desire to belong to a larger entity, but basically we are individuals and we like to have all of our individual rights and privacy and all those other things, not that those things are necessarily bad, but they do tend to get in the way of being involved and united with larger entities.

I recently read a book called *Clicking* by Faith Popcorn. She is a nationally known and very much respected trend watcher. She's been at it for twenty years I think, and in this book *Clicking*, the very first trend that she explains in her book is what she calls "cocooning." It's like a caterpillar making a cocoon, going into the cocoon, and coming out a butterfly. Well, this is "cocooning," and it is what we do when we try to shield ourselves from the harsh unpredictable world outside.

In a nutshell, it is basically this idea that I've been talking about. It is "going it alone" and surrounding yourself in a secure cocoon with all those things that make you feel

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satisfied, and of course blocks out the rest of society. Now you'll see signs of cocooning happening when you see some neighborhood, let's say, putting up security fences in organizing neighborhood watches, or going up to the local government and demanding increased police patrols in their neighborhoods.

Faith Popcorn says that one-third of us has changed our shopping habits because of crime. Instead of going down to the mall, or going downtown, or going to a certain shop, many of us have decided that we would rather order from catalogs or slip onto the Internet and have it delivered to us. That's an example of cocooning. Another thing is, slipping out to a video rental store and bringing our entertainment home rather than going to a movie theater, or going to see the play in the downtown arena, or whatever it happens to be. *Pay Per View* is another idea, another sign of cocooning where everything is beamed right into your house rather than you having to go out and face the big bad world.

We do this even when we go out. We get into our cars and we have all the comforts of home there. We install phones in them, a nifty hi-fi or whatever stereos, with CD players. We put TV's in our vans so that the people in the back seat can view them. We have coolers, and whatever you want, ...all the comforts of home right there in our cars. We have security systems installed on our cars, and if we don't do that, many of us have something like "The Club," or some other theft-deterrent device. Even when we go out to exercise, we block out the rest of the world with headphones, mace, and a big stick, or a big dog.

Those are just examples of cocooning. And things that have added to this is the heavily psychological emphasis that we have in our society that has convinced us that one in four of us is mentally unstable. Of course all of us have neuroses of one kind or another, and so we're not sure whether the guy in line with us at the post office is going to go "postal," to use a modern phrase.

There is a joke going around something like, "Scientists have discovered that three out of four of us have mental problems, and we're not sure about you either," or something along that line. Another thing that has brought this on is the "self-help" industry. They've driven us further into ourselves by making us feel inadequate and unfulfilled—we've got to all reach the top of the mountain whether we have the skills or the physical attributes or whatever. So we're always looking in the mirror and gazing at ourselves, and when we gaze at ourselves we can't gaze at others. That's "cocooning."

Advertising screams at us twenty-four hours a day that we don't have as much as the man next door, so we've got to do it. We've got to get for ourselves. We've got to have

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medicine. Turn on the radio just about any time of the week and you will find out some study has come up with the "fact" that product "X" is going to kill you, and so you'd better not use produce "X," and that other study that you heard about it being healthful for you is actually wrong.

We're always being scared by some study that our health is being threatened by this, that, or the other thing, so all we want to do is climb into our little cocoon and shut out all the bad news. Is it any wonder that we are so self-centered, rather than "other" centered? This society makes us generally spend all our time on ourselves, thinking about our own problems, trying to get more for ourselves, trying to be safe, trying to be fulfilled in one way or another rather than reaching out to others who really need the help.

I would dare say that if most of you took a step back, you'd figure out that you're living a fairly good life. But we are constantly told to be discontent, or told (...it's almost a demand) that we need to look to ourselves and make sure that everything is just okay with us before we go and help the person who really may need it.

I want to start in II Timothy 3 just to notice what Paul lists first in his prophecy describing the character of people during the end time. I'm not going to dwell on this, I just want to bring it up to show you that the Bible agrees with this assessment.

II Timothy 3:1-2 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come:
For men will be lovers of themselves.

That's the very hallmark of this age, and all the other ones that follow after that are results of that. It's this selfishness that broadcasts at us incessantly that causes us to do all these other things, to be proud and blasphemers, to be traitors, to be boasters, and unthankful, unholy, because everything is inward. "*Me first, and if I have time, maybe I'll think about seeing to your needs.*" But Christians are supposed to have a different hallmark.

John 13:34-35 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

John 15:12-13 This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

A Christian's attitude, his outlook, the way he approaches life is 180 degrees away from the way society has been set up by Satan the Devil to function. We are not to be lovers of ourselves, but we're to love one another as Christ has loved us, ...just totally opposite to the way we would naturally want to go.

I've given you this long introduction because I think it sets up the dichotomy that we're faced with here. My purpose today is to pick up where I left off in my last sermon and further develop the idea that I was getting to about our relationships in the church.

Remember right at the end of the sermon I talked about the joints. Those are our relationships in the church. The idea of joints comes from Ephesians 4:16. It's these joints—these relationships—that we have with one another that causes growth in the body—growth and development of our individual character. In a way I kind of feel silly talking about this because it's such a simple concept.

It's so basic to Christianity, but I fear that it's just got to be said. Peter, in one of the books there says, "I am writing this to remind you of these things," and that's basically what I'm saying. I'm speaking to you just to remind you of these things, just so that we get a little bit of a refresher on this very basic concept that we are to love one another, and we show this love in our relationships with each other.

We know this, and I just want to remind you about them so that we'll do it even better, more often, and increase in it. I also suggest that if you have a copy, or can find a copy of *Mystery of the Ages*, to go back and re-read the chapter that Mr. Armstrong wrote as "Mystery of the Church." It's the longest chapter in the book. I don't know if you're aware of that, but it's maybe that way because it may be the most misunderstood concept that he tackled, the most misunderstood mystery, and maybe it's most vital for us to know at this time. Most of us seem to think we know what the church is all about, but maybe it's good to go back and get a refresher on the basics of the purpose of the church.

In the church wars over the past dozen years, I think many of us have forgotten "the what" and "the why" of the church. Instead we've divided into camps of people who ironically believe basically the same thing. Probably most of us would feel comfortable listening to sermons from most of the other groups.

They're teaching the basic doctrines that we all learned under Mr. Armstrong, but we can't seem to get along with each other because of basically minor things. We can't decide whether we should keep new moons or not. Now in the great scheme of things, is that really all that important? I don't know. I don't necessarily think it is. It's not vital for

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our salvation, but there are groups out there that believe that new moons are to be kept just about as holy as a holy day.

And then you have sub-groups of those who don't know which part of the moon to count the new moon from. Is it the last visible crescent? Is it the dark? Is it the earliest visible crescent in the first quarter? What is it? But these are little minor tacky little details that keep us apart. These same groups keep the Sabbath and they keep the holy days.

They believe in salvation by grace, and that we should be doing works and growing in character, et cetera, et cetera, but this one sliver of knowledge keeps us apart, and we don't have the strength of character and the strength of relationships to weather that, and to maybe even agree to disagree, but still soldier on in coming to salvation. Little by little, either by offenses, or sins, or misunderstanding, or just plain pigheadedness, we slowly disintegrate, and the ultimate of this is the independence to (like I had mentioned before) saying, "I am a rock. I am an island. I am a church of one."

Now some wonder if it will end only when each church member is alone and can stand alone. They think that this is some great huge test from God to make sure that we can all stand with all the armor of God and without any help from all the rest of us. I don't think so. I don't think God does that. There's only one that I know of who had to do that to any great extent, and He's our older brother. He stood alone, but God doesn't say that we necessarily have to do that.

He gives us an entire church, a whole body of people made up of many individual members to help us to stand and not give up any ground. I think that this disintegration will end when we decide to show love for one another, when we start to forebear with one another, when we begin to forgive one another, and when we begin building up instead of tearing down. I think it starts with each individual telling himself that that is what he is going to begin to do.

I think the church will begin to unite when we stop pursuing our pet projects and speculations and begin to pursue instead peace, love, and holiness, without which we won't see God, it says in Hebrews 12. Speculations come and go. Prophecies will fail. But love never fails (I Corinthians 13). You could know all prophecies, and if you don't have love, you're nothing. We will unite when we begin to recognize that we are nothing, and that we know nothing, except by the grace of God. And what we are and what we know is less for us, less for me, than for serving the body of Christ. What God has given you will help you, but His main aim is to get you to use it for the benefit of your brothers and sisters in the church especially.

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We're going to review what I gave the last time, hopefully fairly quickly so I can get into some new material. Let's read this through.

Ephesians 4:11-12 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry.

Notice I went right through there, ..."for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry," not "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministering," but "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry," for the purpose of serving.

Ephesians 4:12-16 ...for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine [sounds very current to me], by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

We're going to take this like we did last time, one phrase at a time. In these seven verses is a great deal of meat in due season. Sure, it's applicable to every time in the church, but also to us now. In the condition we seem to be in, it is very applicable. It shows us the ministry's function, the ministry's marching orders, and what they're supposed to do for the rest of the church, as well as the goals and the means to reach those goals of the entire church. They show us the standard we are called to emulate and the method that we are to employ to reach it. It's just packed full of things here.

Notice that the first duty listed for the ministry is the one I emphasized, ...to equip the saints to be able to serve. That's what that means. "To equip the saints to be able to serve." I believe it was Paul who told Timothy, "Teach these things to other men so that they can teach them then to other men." It's a great big chain of advice and instruction, and counsel, and knowledge in edifying, so that it can be learned and used and re-taught. That's what the ministry is employed to do, to equip each one, every individual member, to then be able to take what they've learned, use it, and teach it. That's the service.

So we are to give you tools, the knowledge, to show out-going concern for your brethren, to show the love and the service. Just from taking it from this angle, God's truth, His way of life, is eminently and ultimately practical. It's not something to be stored up in one's head. It's something to be understood and then used. There are people these days who go to college, ...and they go to college, and they go to college, and they become career students. What good is that? You have a thirst for knowledge, but what good does it do anybody in the end, except that person? He has his head full of mush, and does it ever come out in any good toward anybody else? God doesn't work that way.

He wants us to keep learning, but He also wants us to then take it and put it into practice. What good is knowledge when it would never be used? So, God's purpose here for the ministry in teaching this is always to produce righteousness. I'm not talking about the definition of righteousness that many people have, meaning just being good, having your own pure personal character. Righteousness, in its basic definition, is right doing. It's not having the knowledge and applying it just for yourself. It's actually going out and taking that and using it for the good of others. I want to read this one Scripture from James 4:17, because he puts it in a negative way, but it's the same thing, the same idea.

James 4:17 Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

It's missing the mark of what God wants us to do. There is a Scripture that talks about "ever learning and never coming to the knowledge of the truth." This is the negative way of phrasing it. We have all the knowledge in our brain about what to do and how to live righteously, but if we don't do it, it's sin to us. It becomes selfish, a selfish pursuit of knowledge, and we're missing the reason that God gave it to us. That's what this word *sin* is, ...*hamartia*. We're missing the point, missing the mark. In James 1:27 it says, "Pure and undefiled religion is helping the widows and the fatherless in their affliction, and keeping yourself unspotted from the world." Notice what he put first. "*Pure religion is helping those who are in need, and showing your love to them, ...and then keeping yourself pure.*" Remember what I said, the knowledge God gives us is eminently and ultimately practical, useful, helpful, outgoing.

Now back to Ephesians 4:12. It simply says that our Christian lives are merely a series of relationships over time. The ministry was put there to teach us to serve, and they are teaching us to build the body of Christ up. The body of Christ is made up of many members, and the building up takes place as these many members interact with one

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another and edify one another. It's a very rare instance that an action we take does not affect somebody else. When we speak, our words fill somebody else's mind and produces a reaction. When we act, others either observe us or receive our action, and they in turn respond, and the effect that we have on these people, either through our mouth or through our actions, will be either good or ill. I don't know that it's ever really neutral.

They either take us well, or they take us badly. They take what we say with grace, or they take offense. We either serve them, or we harm them. I guess there may be a time or two when it reaches the neutral line, but it's not very often, and this verse 12 tells us that the goal of the ministry is to teach the brethren always to be of service, rather than destructive, ...always building up, rather than tearing down. Now this in turn results in building up the body of Christ until we become unified in doctrine and knowledge.

Ephesians 4:13 ... till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man.

That's a tall order, isn't it? Perfect unity doesn't occur until we all believe and know, and therefore act like our elder brother, Jesus Christ. That's why the ministry keeps on and on and on and on over the same territory Sabbath after Sabbath after Sabbath after Sabbath, because we haven't reached it yet. We haven't come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. We haven't come to a perfect man. We haven't come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ...and so the ministry keeps on preaching. It's their job, and if it gets trite, repetitive, boring, ...sorry, that's our job.

We have to keep on going over it until we produce the perfect man in the body of Christ. We'll probably never reach it, so get used to hearing the same old sermons every week. Hopefully we can come at it from new angles and give you deeper knowledge and explain things in a little bit better way, but God, who gave us this goal, desires that we strive to attain it, and so the ministry, if we're going to be faithful, is going to keep on preaching, because it's in everyone's best interest that we do so, ...for our own, and yours as well, because we all want to be there in God's kingdom.

It's obvious that the church hasn't reached it, and in fact I would dare say that some of us have regressed in recent years. We can easily see this, because though Christ is not divided, the church is. We have schisms, and schisms (as we learned) are there to prove who is on His side. Paul says there must be schisms in the church. There must be factions, because it shows up those who are really following Christ. It makes them manifest.

The goal is that there be no divisions, but Paul tells us obviously that there will be, and that's part of the way God set it up.

I Corinthians 1:10 Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together [Paul uses the same type of language here as he did in Ephesians] in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Now there's a whopper for you! You not only have to have the same mind, but you have to make the same decisions, make the same choices. Oh, that we were there!

I Corinthians 1:12-14 Now I say this, that each of you says, I am of Paul, or I am of Apollos, or I am of Cephas, or I am of Christ. Is Christ divided? [A rhetorical question. "NO!" I think that's the answer that Paul wants us to come to.] Was Paul crucified for you? [Well that clinches it. The answer he's getting at for us to say is "No."] Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? [Of course not. Then he goes on.] I thank God that I baptized none of you.

He didn't want to be a stumbling block for them. After he had just gotten through telling them about how the holy spirit works in them to produce the mind of Christ, he says:

I Corinthians 3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal.

As to babes in Christ. Another language sound bite or whatever from Ephesians 4. Remember he said we're no longer to be children. Now he says, *Well, you're babes in Christ, and still carnal.*

I Corinthians 3:2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able.

Part of the ministry's job is to make them able. Remember I said that it would be equipping of the saints so that they would be able to serve, able to edify, and these people weren't even able to receive strong meat.

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I Corinthians 3:3-4 For you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says I am of Paul, and another, I am of Apollos, are you not carnal?

It sounds logical to me, that it's a sign that when we're divided, full of envy and schisms and strife, what that is doing is exposing our carnality, that we're still individualistic and self-centered, rather than family oriented and others-centered, ...outgoing. Now I think we're all in this boat. I don't know a one of us who has completely thrown off his flesh while he's still here in this mortal coil. We all feel our flesh and we all get driven by it. We're all still carnal in one respect or another. Now I'm sure there are prophetic reasons why God has allowed our scattering, but I think our carnality as a whole made it very easy for Him to fulfill that prophecy. It's like the three little pigs. We weren't the pigs that were in the house made of brick.

When the big bad wolf came, we were in the house made of straw, and one little huff and a puff, and it blew our house down. Jesus used another analogy. We built the house on sand, rather than on the rock. When Satan came in the flood, he was able to make those sands shift, and the house crumbled. The mortar wasn't very strong. I don't believe that our carnality has been removed. That's basically what I wanted to get at here. We're still feeling it and reacting in that way, and so we continue to be scattered. We all have room to improve.

Ephesians 4:14-15 We should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.

Verse 14 talks about us no longer being children, tossed to and fro. This obviously tells me that the purpose of the ministry is to protect the church from false doctrine. In many respects the ministry has done fairly well in this over the past several years, not just in Church of the Great God, but in other churches as well. We've really tried to get back to basics, tried to get back to Jude 3 to "the faith once delivered," and really reprove the doctrines so that the sheep will know what they should know, and be assured of them, and then go forward in confidence in those doctrines.

Notice that in verse 15 it seems to say that we do this—that we help people no longer be children, that we guard them from false doctrine—by speaking the truth in love, and

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this causes maturity, from being spiritual babes to taking on the character of God and Christ. When we speak the truth, we expose error, like a light shining in a dark place. The word of God is often compared to a light. When you turn a light on, the darkness is dispelled. So truth exposes error. It also exposes this trickery. It exposes craftiness and deception. It calms and it settles, or it should. It guides and directs. We don't have time to go into Psalm 19 and Psalm 119, but it shows there what the word of God does and is, and it might be a good study just to read those two Psalms and get re-grounded in the effective working of the word of God.

Now back to Ephesians 4:16. This really gets into the member's part of things. Because we have a common bond in Christ, we are designed to work together. We are His body. He is the head, and we are members individually put into the body where Christ wants us to be. And then He gives the order from the brain, and we're supposed to march according to His orders

Ephesians 4:16 From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Now remember what I brought out in the last sermon. We are harmonized and solidified by the effective energy, ...the work done by each joint. That's the point I was bringing out mostly in my last sermon. I was talking about these joints. You have a ball and socket joint. You have the ball, and it fits in a socket, and it moves within the socket. The ball and the socket make one joint, not two. They are one joint and they work together. If the socket is out of line, the ball doesn't work, and it will eventually shear off, or it will get upbraided to the point where even if it gets slipped back into the joint properly, it's not going to work smoothly.

So these two things have to work together as one, to make sure they and the hip joint make a person walk perfectly. Just keep that in the back of your mind as we think about that. If each person then in the church is half of a joint, and there are thousands of people in the church, there are multiple thousands of joints, because each one of you interacts with every other one of you. Once you start getting into large numbers, the number of joints just seems to multiply expedientially.

I'm going to have to get my father-in-law to work out the formula for that for me. It's just incredible. Once you get out of the single digits, the number of joints just explodes. It's not necessarily so that each person will interact with every other person, ...not in this

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human lifetime. (Maybe not face to face.) But even if one member is in the toe, and the other member is in the left shoulder, they are still part of the same organism that's walking forward, and both have to do their part to cause that body to grow.

Yet in the spiritual realm, they are joints even though they're separated by however many miles. If we each do our share, it says right there at the end of verse 16, it causes growth for the edifying of the whole body. How? In love. That is the vehicle in which the growth and the edifying of the body occurs. If you want to say that the love that we show each other is blood, ...I don't know. I don't know if that analogy works. But love is the vehicle by which everything works together to cause growth in the body.

The main lesson we get from this verse is that the unity and the growth of the church depends on the **quality** of our relationships with each other. Not that we have them, but that they are quality relationships. You can have a bad relationship, and that's not the kind of quality that you want. You want it to be of sterling quality—the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. If our relationships are loving and edifying, growth is just automatically produced. It can't do anything else.

But if on the other hand our relationships are strained and we're at cross purposes, we think that the body of Christ should walk this way, and somebody else thinks it should walk that way, ...well, we're going to have strife and disunity in the body. That's why serving each other, showing outgoing concern for each other, helping each other, is so vital to the church, because when we serve, we walk together. We're in lockstep, if you will.

Let's go to Romans 12. This is an interesting section, a very long section on practical Christian living, and it continues actually for several chapters. In effect, it continues through the rest of the book. I want us to see, though, these opening comments in chapter 12, because it sets the stage for why we are supposed to do what Paul commands us to do as he gets into the practical steps of how a Christian should behave.

Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

As Paul introduces these Christian acts, the first point is that we are to be a living sacrifice, and sacrifice is the essence of godly love. Remember what I just got finished saying. Ephesians 4:16 says that growth and edifying of the body takes place in love,

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and sacrifice is the fundamental ground, the basis, the essence of love. You've got to start there.

Romans 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Point 2 is that we must resist the world and transform our character. These are done at the same time. They're two parts of the same puzzle, two faces of the same coin. We resist the world, and we work on our character. This is the "keeping ourselves unspotted from the world" aspect of things.

Romans 12:3 For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.

The third thing is humility. That is our attitude as we do all of these things. So we have love, we have keeping ourselves unspotted from the world and making our goal the growth of character, and then the third thing is that we use the attitude of humility.

What does he say? This is really the one I was really aiming toward:

Romans 12:4-8 For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them; if prophecy, let us prophecy in proportion to our faith; or ministry [service], let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

The fourth thing is using our gifts for the benefit of the church, ...for the church, and in the church.

We have four things here:

1. Sacrifice and Love. (That's the ground for all that we do.)

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2. Don't conform to the world. (Make sure you try to transform yourself into the image of Christ. Go from the old man to the new man.)
3. Do everything in humility. (That's the proper attitude.)
4. Be aware of and use the gifts God has given you for the church and in the church.

And then he launches into Christian behavior...

Galatians 6:9-10 And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

I went to this Scripture just to confirm what I had just said—that this is a basic part of Christian living. We are to be doing good, and we are especially instructed to perform those acts for the members of the church. Remember, it takes a church. This is the vehicle that God has given us to learn these things. God has put within the church all the factors, all the material, all the opportunities we need to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

The church, if you will, is the laboratory where we can experiment toward becoming sons of God. If you go back and read *Mystery Of The Ages*, Mr. Armstrong talks about the church being a teachers college. It is the vehicle where we can experiment to become the perfect man. Now I used this word *experiment* advisably. It's not because we don't know what is right and true. That's not what we're experimenting with. We're not experimenting with the way of life. We're not experimenting with the truth. That's not what we're experimenting with.

This *WORD* [God's word] is very simple and pure. It's already been tried seven times and found *A Plus, AAA Grade*. So we don't need to experiment with the truth. What we are experimenting with is applying what we know. The church is the vehicle God uses to teach the truth, and to give us practice doing it, ...and then He has given us lots of brothers and sisters to experiment on. But the experimentation that we do is all in growing in character and helping them grow in character, building them up while you build yourself up, and growing in grace and knowledge.

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Galatians 5:13 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

This is just another verse to give you some background and proof that this is what we need to be doing.

Galatians 5:14-15 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!

See, if we do the opposite, if we're self-serving and destructive, we'll end up tearing each other apart. But if we serve one another in love, we will build the church. This is what I closed my last sermon with, showing that after He's redeemed us, God has given us great freedom of mind, of action, of choice. He's freed us from the curse of the law. He's freed us from the fear of death. He's freed us from enslavement to sin, and so on and so on.

I gave about five of them. And then He says once you're freed, you need to use this freedom to serve. That's where the idea of being a slave of righteousness comes in. He severed our relationship from our former master, and freed us, and then took us into slavery again to Himself, and to serving our brethren in righteousness.

Of course, like Paul said here, this fulfills the intent of God's law: Love. Outgoing concern. "Give." Remember that? About ten or twelve years or so ago a little white-haired man, over and over and over again, talked about the two trees in the Garden of Eden, about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life, and how the one represented Satan's way, and the other represented God's way, and how he had distilled it down to two words, ...the way of "give," and the way of "get."

We got sick and tired of it, didn't we? I read somewhere that by the end of his life the Apostle John had one message that he gave wherever he went. "God is love. Love one another." "God is love. Love one another." And they, those first century Christians in the Ephesian era, around the city of Ephesus, got tired of it, as many of us did. Like I said in another sermon, when apostles get old, they distill everything down to something very simple. "Give versus get." "The Tree of Life versus the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil." "Self-service versus outgoing concern." And that's what it was. But maybe we don't know how to apply it practically. It's very simple to understand, but how do you put

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it to use? How can we show loving service to one another that will begin to unify the body of Christ?

Let's go to I Thessalonians 4. I want to go here because this is just a good starting place. I hope this is true of your life as you live it now. Listen to this.

I Thessalonians 4:9 But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another.

And aren't we all! That's one of the first things we are taught when we become Christians. The two great commandments of the law are: "You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind; and the second is like unto it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That is the basic teaching of God.

I Thessalonians 4:10 And indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. [That was true of the Thessalonian Church.] But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more.

Don't get satisfied with the amount of loving your brother that you're doing right now. Increase more and more. Don't hit the "status quo" and remain at the "status quo." Don't be static in your love toward your brother, but increase more and more.

I Thessalonians 4:11-12 [I urge you] that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business. [Well there's a good one!] And to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.

Let's ask some questions here. Apply this to yourself.

Do we lead a quiet life, or are things always in turmoil? Do we live in peace, or is it in constant strife? If you are living in strife and turmoil, what are you doing to contribute to it?

Do we mind our own business, or are we busybodies and meddlers? Do we always want to know what the other guy over the fence is doing? Do we always call up somebody for the latest news about what's going on over in this church and in that

church, or with that person and his problem?

Is our "helpfulness" really a guise for poking our nose in where we're not wanted? With some people it is. They serve in order to get the goods. That's something we have to consider. Do we work, or are we lazy? I'm not *just* talking about our physical labor for the food we put on our table. It could be spiritual work. It could be our service to one another.

Do we work with our own hands? That's something we have to ask. Or are people always making allowances for you? Are you living off the goodness of another's heart? That's more physical, but some people think they are owed something. They are victims of circumstance, and so they want everybody to give to them, rather than working for it.

Do we show the same Christian character to our work buddies as we do to the people who sit beside us in church? That's what Paul asks here. He says here "that you may walk properly toward those who are outside."

Is your life hypocritical? Do you put on your best character and slip into a chair at church just once each week? Do your acquaintances in the world see Christ in you, or do they see "Joe Six-Pack" who has had a few too many six packs? Or do they see someone that curses five or six days a week, but one day a week he's just the soul of sound and wise speech? How do the people in the world see you?

Lastly, Paul says, "I urge you that you may lack nothing." I bet you he doesn't mean, "*Do we lack a pair of shoes, or do we lack a new VCR, or do we lack the latest PlayStation game, or those kind of lacks?*" I think what he meant was, "*Do we lack anything that makes us better Christians, or are we satisfied with ourselves where we stand?*" Have we come into the church and accepted God's grace, and then say "*Take me as I am, Lord,*" without one plea? Or do we lack something that would make us a better Christian?

Titus 2:1-5 But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine. That the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things, that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.

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Now did you notice the area of service in this list of virtues? I don't mean to pick on the older women here, but this is just an example that is in the Bible. In our society this doesn't happen, and I think it's a shame and a detriment to us. Paul says the older women are to teach the younger women certain things, in the church. This is amazing. They must admonish the young women to love their husbands and to love their children. Now is this happening in the church? I don't know. Did you see why Paul said it should be done?

"That the word of God may not be blasphemed." Those are pretty strong words. Do the older women do it? I don't know. Do the younger women appreciate it? Do they take it? I don't know. This is something that is good and necessary and godly, and the reason is that God wants to make sure that the mistakes of the older generation don't get repeated in the younger generation. He wants the young ones to avoid the mistakes, to avoid the troubles and problems, but this act of service can be done and received very badly, and that's where we work on the relationships.

That's why it's a big experiment in applying God's word. He gives us a command, and sure as anything, we're not going to do it right the first time, or we're not going to take it right the first time. But in love we can build up the church by doing things like this. It's got to be love that is given, and love received, ...joints working together. One person in that joint is not going to cover for the deficiencies of the other one. One gives service to the other, the other receives service from the other, and they've both got to do it in love for there to be good built out of it.

Now I just pulled one out of the hat here for women. It just happened to be here, and I thought it was a good one, but it applies equally to men as well. The older men should be teaching the younger men certain things, like how to love their wives and how to love their children, and how to help around the house, and how to be a better student of their finances, and how to do this and how to do that so that the mistakes aren't passed down from one generation to the next. Older men should teach younger men to be sober minded, to work hard, to provide for their own, to show their wives love and respect, to teach their children properly.

Fathers do this for sons, and in the church elder brothers should do this for the younger brothers. That's how the family of God works. It's not just an analogy folks. It's a way of life. God's family works a lot like physical human families should work. We're just not bound by blood. Well, we are. We're bound by the blood of Jesus Christ, but not our own blood. We're bound by love. We're bound by the grace that we've all been given. We're bound by the calling that's been given to you individually.

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Now maybe you've noticed that I haven't mentioned the normal acts of service we all think about, as setting up the chairs, ushering, walking security, parking cars, distributing or collecting the song books. These can be rather impersonal. They could be done by a loner. They could be done without thought or concern really for anybody else. They could be done just to say that you've served in the church. They are necessary things, but do they really do a whole lot to solidify and harmonize the church? Those are good things to do, but they're just the beginning of the service that I'm talking about.

They're helpful, and when done humbly, and done in a good proper spirit, they're very good, but real Christian service only begins at that point. The most real Christian service occurs somewhere other than at church services. It should happen here of course, but remember what I said about love. The essence of love is sacrifice. I don't think most of you sacrificed a whole lot to come to church. Real Christian service comes at times that are not necessarily convenient, and that you have nothing else to do, and so "Hey! Why not?" As Christ termed it, it is laying down one's life for his friends, taking time out, maybe giving up something that you wanted to do, to go help someone who really needs it, and it's done when no one else is looking, and without thought of reward or any kind of payback. John, in I John 3:16-19, told us that this is what it is, that we should not love in word only, but in deed and in truth.

I John 3:16-19 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.

Love, service, is something we do. "Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him." That's how we know where we stand, and we can be confident in where we stand, because we're not only loving in word. We may be talking the talk, but instead we know where we stand when we walk the walk, and we love in deed and in truth.

Look at Proverbs 31:10 to the end of the chapter—at the "Proverbs 31 Woman." Look at that in terms of the church—the bride of Christ—and see what she does. Her family knows her for giving and for her service. She provides for her own. She is wise and helpful. She excels in all this, ...and what does it say in the end? That her husband is honored in the gate, that her children praise her, and her husband praises her. That's the praise we're looking for—the praise of our Husband-to-be, Jesus Christ. He is the

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One who knows best about this sort of thing, because Ephesians 4 says He is the standard that we are to emulate.

When He sees His wife living up to that standard, He is pleased and He praises her for it. Let's just see His example in closing, in John 13:12-17. You know, every year at Passover we go through this ritual—the foot washing service. I won't describe the foot washing service. I'll go to His comments afterward. That foot washing service is all about what I've been speaking about today. It is a ritual that we go through once a year to rededicate ourselves to doing exactly this, to serving our brethren, even to the point of washing their smelly feet. So as Christ served us, let us serve each other. Listen to this:

John 13:12-17 So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. [Now listen to this promise.] If you know these things, [Remember what I said before, it's great to know these things, and that's fine, but...] ...happy are you if you do them.

Blessed are you if you follow our Master's example of serving His servant. If you do these things, we will be happy.