

The Anvil of God



the church

by Pastor Dick Jones

Table of Contents

Introduction	pp 1-2
Chapter One Chosen to Serve	pp 3-5
Chapter Two The <i>Anvil</i> as a Metaphor	pp 6-7
Chapter Three The Answer	pp 8-10
Chapter Four The Niche	pp 11-12
Chapter Five God's <i>Varegatae</i>	pp 13-14
Chapter Six To Invert	pp 15-17
Chapter Seven To Love	pp 18-20

Introduction

Most Christians have some sort of conception about what the local church ought to be. Some see the local church as a means of evangelizing sinners. Some believe that churches exist to bind up the wounded and lift up the downhearted. Others see the church as principal repository of biblical truths and as a means of protecting the integrity of the Bible. Many view the church as a mechanism for educating, informing, and discipling believers. Indeed, the church should do all of these things. Yet none of these important objectives is adequate to convey God's purpose for the church.

Then there are also popular perspectives toward church that revolve around entertainment, consumerism, and self-aggrandizement. Sadly, many of the churches looked to as models of what a successful church ought to be fit somewhere within this point of view. In most of these churches, whether evangelical, fundamentalist, or charismatic in doctrinal and theological orientation, the common denominator is the anthropocentric understanding of the purpose of the local church. In one way or another, the ministry and work of the church revolves around what the people attending want rather than what God wants.

The purpose and existence of the local church is best expressed in Isaiah 41:8-9.

“But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen,
Descendent of Abraham My friend,
You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth,
And called from its remotest parts,
And said to you, ‘You are my servant,
I have chosen you and not rejected you.’”

The visible church is Israel or Jacob. The church is a chosen instrument of God, chosen to be God's consecrated servant, chosen for service unto Him.

In the context of serving God, various sorts of ministries and activities will occur. However, it is a proper understanding of the purpose of the church that should shape the ministries of the church. The conceptions of the church listed above are, to one degree or another, about men. They are certainly not all bad, but if they become the church's *raison d'être*, the church will ultimately fail to fulfill its high calling from God.

The church collectively and believers individually are chosen vessels; chosen by God to serve Him in a variety of ways - yet always with the

primary and essential purpose of service rendered to God. This must be the church's understanding of itself if it is to be faithful to all that God will direct it to do. This must also be the individual believer's understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

There are many good books on the church. The intent of this tract is not to compete with them. The purpose of this work is to provide a reorientation in the way the church views itself. It is my objective to provide a simple and practical perspective toward *doing church* that will create healthy, fruitful congregations. Further, it is my hope that this new perspective will challenge believers toward a greater commitment to their church, one that will discourage church hopping and the development of a hyper-critical spirit, the former being counterproductive toward the sanctification of the believer and the latter requiring wasted resources of time and energy on the part of the church's leaders as they deal with the negative consequences.

The key to this new perspective is in understanding that the local church is the *anvil* of God. The late Dr. Gordon H. Clark authored a book entitled *God's Hammer – The Bible and Its Critics*. The metaphor of a hammer is appropriate in regard to God's Word, especially when considering the effect of the diligent study of Scripture on the character of men. Indeed, God uses the metaphor in Jeremiah 23:29. "Is not My word like fire?" declares the Lord, "and like a hammer which shatters a rock?" God the Holy Spirit uses Scripture to hammer away at all those parts of our character and life that do not belong. This process of sanctification is a work of grace, but it is only truly effective in a particular context. That context is the local church.

To combine the two metaphors, the bible is God's *hammer* and the church is the *anvil* of God. In order for the work of one to produce the desired result, it must be combined with the other! The relationship and interaction of the believer with the church provides a hard surface with the appropriate contours upon which the hammer can shape, mold, and conform the Christian to the character of Christ. This process presupposes a commitment and a willingness to persevere on the part of the believer which allows the work of sanctification to be effectual. The process is not always pleasant, indeed, it may be painful, but it is necessary. The *anvil* of God is essential to the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart and life of a believer.

Chosen to Serve

Chapter 1

“You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain...”

John 15:16

The perspective that most have toward the church contains the seeds of dissatisfaction and finally disaffection. If a believer comes into the church insisting on having his needs met, even legitimate needs, eventually he will be disappointed. Ironically, it is often the church that sets the stage for this disappointment by offering an impression that the church is here to make one happy. This is especially apparent in what is termed the church growth movement. David Wells writes in his book *God in the Wasteland*,

“Allowing the consumer to be sovereign...encourages us to...ask ourselves perpetually whether the “products” we are being offered meet our present ‘felt needs’...The consumer, like the marketer, is now making fresh calculations all the time. And as it is, the churches that have adopted the strategy of marketing themselves have effectively installed revolving doors. The pews may be full, but never with the same people from week to week. People keep entering, lured by the church’s attractions or just to check out the wares, but then they move on because they feel their needs, real or otherwise, are not being met.” (p. 75)

Wells is describing the process in which the desire to grow numerically seduces a church into designing a philosophy of ministry that contains its own seeds of destruction. This is sometimes seen in yielding to crass sensationalism in order to attract new folks and at other times it is much more subtle and difficult to detect. In fact, the pastor may not realize that he has succumbed to this temptation until he finds himself surrounded by folks complaining about various aspects of the church’s ministry. The complaints may be boiled down to what the *complainer does or does not like* about the church. Perhaps he has been inadvertently encouraged to think that it is more important what he thinks than what God thinks!

The church is a people set apart by God to serve Him. Dr. Edward J. Young writes in his commentary on Isaiah 41:8-9,

“The choice was on God’s part, and in that He chose Israel He did not choose other nations but passed them by. By a calling of grace God chose Israel and set her apart to be his servant...As a nation Israel must not guide her own destiny nor plot her own course for she is a servant and must do the bidding of her master, her covenant God. Having been chosen of God, Israel in her natural life must express this condition of servitude by its works...This is the first occurrence in Isaiah of the terms servant to designate someone as a servant of the Lord [v8]...First, Israel must learn the meaning of the term...In her there must be inculcated the truth that although the promises had been hers, she was nevertheless but a servant who must not do her own will but the will of her covenant and electing God.” (Vol. 3, 81)

What was true of Israel as the visible church under the Old Testament administration of the Covenant of Grace is true today for the visible church in the New Testament administration of the Covenant of Grace. Further, it may be said that all mankind is, finally, created for serving God. Harry Blamires writes in *Recovering the Christian Mind*, “the ultimate purpose of humanity is the service of God.” (p. 64)

The calling of God is itself a work of grace, but grace is especially manifested as the church begins to truly serve God. That service unto God involves real work, laboring in the church to further the Kingdom of God. The idea of inviting men and women to join you in hard work may seem like a futile task, but believers were recreated for just such an endeavor. Our Lord explained this as He said,

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

The work of a believer in the church is a labor of love. This is what God created us for, and elected us for, and what He calls us to do. The yoke of Christ *fits* the believer perfectly, as a former pastor once explained to me.* Jesus did not mean that the work He came to accomplish nor the work He calls the believer to join Him in would be “easy”. It is not always comfortable, convenient, and without difficulty. Rather He was expressing the truth that there is genuine fulfillment and a true sense of purpose in pursuing the work to which Jesus calls all who follow Him. In that regard,

for the Christian, real peace and joy can be found only in the pursuit of the calling of God, serving Him.

Remarking on the challenge of calling people to submit their wills toward service unto God, Blamires quotes Isaac Barrow,

“Our duty moveth on this hinge, the free submission of our will to the will of God... We must join in the combat; we must take the yoke upon us, for God is only served by volunteers.”

He concludes by explaining that it is “the theme of the need for costly, self-surrender” which “counterpoints the theme of joy in the testimony of those best qualified to guide us.” (p. 77) Christians become a living testimony to the grace of God as others see them serving their Creator and Redeemer.

*I am referring to my first pastor, Rev. Darrell Robinson, who, at the time, was pastor of First Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas. In terms of application, his point is well taken. *Vines* explains that the term *chrestos* “signifies fit for use, able to be used, hence, good, virtuous...”

The *Anvil* as a Metaphor

Chapter 2

“I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...”

Romans 12:1-2

In *Webster’s Deluxe Unabridged Dictionary*, an *anvil* is defined as:

“an iron or steel block on which metal objects are hammered into shape; figuratively, anything on which blows are laid...”; to *anvil* is to “use an *anvil* in forming or forging things”

The *anvil* is an integral part of the forging process in which useless metal is shaped and formed into a useful tool. The shape and form follow the intended function or purpose. While the process may result in an attractive form, aesthetics is not typically the primary concern in the forging process. In Isaiah 41:7, the prophet describes the process of fashioning idols on the part of the pagan “nations” of “the coastlands” (v5) with ironic concern. He writes,

“So the craftsman encourages the smelter, *and* he who smoothes *metal* with the hammer *encourages* him who beats the *anvil*, saying of the soldering, ‘It is good’; and he fastens it with nails, *that* it should not totter.” (NAS)

The *anvil* in the passage above is not being used to honor God or prepare objects for proper service and worship, but rather as a means of dishonoring God in the formation of idols. Notwithstanding this, the role and function of the *anvil* is described graphically so that it can easily be applied to God’s forging and shaping the believer so that he might serve Him. “And he who smoothes metal with the hammer encourages him who beats the *anvil*...” God the Holy Spirit beats the *anvil* with the Word of God or God’s hammer. The church is the *anvil* upon which the believer is smoothed, shaped, and beaten, with God Himself applying the blows.

The very process of forging and shaping necessitates some sort of *anvil* in order to be effective. In terms of sanctification and service, the church serves that purpose. In God’s providence, He has provided the means and the context in which the forging process might produce the desired result. Apart from or outside of this context, the process is clumsy

and ineffective at best. The church as God's *anvil* is absolutely essential to growing and equipping the believer for service unto God.

The tragedy is that in contemporary evangelicalism the concept of the church as an essential and vital part of maturing each believer has been largely lost. While most believers recognize that involvement and participation in the church is still a part of being a Christian, they have not grasped the essential nature of the church as God's *anvil*. Consequently, their commitment to remaining on the *anvil* during the hammering and shaping is ephemeral. They will remain attached to the *anvil* and submitted to the forging process so long as they feel it is fruitful or until their enjoyment wanes. The problem with this perspective is that the forging process is not necessarily an enjoyable thing. Further, they may have no idea what God is doing or for what service He is preparing them. Their shortsighted perspective on what is always a long-term process creates a conditional commitment that often fails during the trials of life.

If the church is indeed the *anvil* which God uses to beat and hammer out the character of Christ in the believer, our generation of evangelicals must make dramatic changes in the way we *view and do church*. Catering to the felt needs of the lost in order to win them to Christ or to retain the disaffected church members is almost always folly in the end. Neither the individual believer nor the church collectively benefits, nor is the kingdom of God likely to be advanced under such conditions.

Acquiring the proper perspective toward the church as God's *anvil* will be difficult. It will require resisting the pressure of the world to conform the church to what it thinks the church ought to be. It will require the ignoring of the trappings of success that are so important to evangelicals in the West. Numerical and financial reverses will be the initial response to this paradigm-shattering reorientation of the church. Pastors will be blamed by success-oriented congregations and lay leaders for this reversal. It will require courage, commitment, and spiritual insight to see the change through. But the price will be small indeed as God's *anvil* begins to accomplish the work for which it was established. A contemporary Gideon's army prepared and equipped to truly serve its sovereign Lord will change the world as the kingdom of God is advanced.

The Answer

Chapter 3

“We have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God...”

Colossians 1:9-10

I recall reading a book many years ago in which the author described an instance in which he walked into his classroom and found *Jesus is the answer* written on the blackboard. He responded to his students, “Yes, but what’s the question?” He saw the statement that *Jesus is the answer* as an indicator of the simple-mindedness of most Christians. He failed to grasp that Jesus is indeed the answer to the most fundamental questions all men face.

Jesus is both the point of beginning and ending for the deepest need that man has. Jesus calls our attention to this in the question he posed to His disciples, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Matthew 16:13) The disparity of answers that followed is illustrative of the confusion that continues about Christ in our own day. “Some (say) John the Baptist, son of Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” (Matthew 16:14) It was Peter who answered correctly, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16)

Jesus continues by explaining that Peter and his confession of Christ as “the Son of the living God” are the foundation upon which His church will be built.* Further, He points to the authority the church has with the dramatic statement that He is giving “the keys of the Kingdom of heaven” to the church and, implicitly, its leaders. It is then in this church, founded by Christ Himself, that Jesus is to be found. This is not to say that Christ is limited to revealing Himself to men only through the church, but rather that Christ will be known primarily and substantially through the visible church.

Many of the early church leaders made this clear in their writings. Cyprian dogmatically asserted that, “You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the Church for your Mother” Calvin agreed when he wrote, “...for those to whom He (God) is Father the church may also be Mother.” Robert Letham writes in *The Work of Christ* that “Salvation therefore takes place *into* the church, *in* the church and *in* connection *with* the church.”

Calvin referred to the unique position the church has in regard to redemption when he wrote “Furthermore, away from her bosom (the church) one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.” (pp 216-217)

It is clear that most within the historic, orthodox church affirmed that it is the visible church which has been primarily entrusted with the means of grace. The sacraments, discipline, and the gospel itself are administered, exercised, and explained by and through local churches which continue to embrace orthodox Christianity.

When men ask the fundamental questions of life they are really asking who Christ is. Francis Schaeffer explained this in his work *How Should We Then Live?* He used the painting of Paul Gauguin entitled *Whence Come We? What Are We? Whither Do We Go?* to describe how the artist, a follower of Rousseau, illustrated contemporary man’s plight of despair and desperation. He states Gauguin wrote that his painting was “a philosophical work, comparable to the gospel.” (p.159) Sadly, Gauguin’s gospel brought him only impotent answers, as he attempted suicide shortly after completing the painting. Apparently, his gospel did not provide the answer he really needed. Jesus and His gospel would have. When Christ is embraced wholeheartedly in the context of a loving, committed congregation of sincere believers, the gospel heals men spiritually, emotionally, and sociologically. Schaeffer, in another book entitled *Death in the City*, describes man’s separation from God as “alienation”. He writes:

“First of all, man is separated from God; second, he is separated from himself, thus the psychological problems of life; third, he is separated from other men, thus the sociological problems of life...” (p. 86)

It was Saint Augustine who expressed the profound truth that *our hearts are restless indeed until they find rest in Thee*. He was expressing the spiritual *angst* that all men feel in their inherent estrangement from God. While all men have need to be healed of this alienation from God, only in Jesus can that healing occur. Further, it is within the context of the Body of Christ that the spiritual healing is most thorough and effective. To put this point in theological terms, a believer’s justification occurs when God declares him to be justified. The ongoing sanctification, which is the progressive work of salvation, occurs through a believer’s submission to and participation in the means of grace, in and through the visible church.

Men are also healed emotionally through their union with Christ, especially as that union with Christ becomes actualized in the practical realm of a local church. Emotions are deceptive and will have an ebb and flow which can be disconcerting, particularly to a new believer. Through the interaction with other believers, this ebb and flow will finally yield to spiritual maturity as psychological and emotional healing occur. This is especially true when a believer is committed to work through the emotions experienced in life in the context of intimacy with other believers. Forgiveness, kindness, compassion, and patience are acted out in the context of the local church. It is in this setting that believers begin to understand what it means to be forgiven, to know the kindness of God, to see the compassion of God, and to know the patience of God. As Christians are healed emotionally they also experience sociological healing, as one believer learns to love another.

Jesus is indeed the answer and that is best understood within the framework of the visible church. The church or the *anvil of God* brings clarity and direction as people struggle with the challenges and questions common to all men. It is upon God's *anvil* that the answers all men long for are heard.

*For further explanation of Matthew 16, the author recommends the commentary offered in *The New Geneva Study Bible*.

The Niche

Chapter 4

“But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired... Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.”

1 Corinthians 12:18, 27

Virtually everyone has heard the expression *he found his niche*. This conveys the fact that someone is where he ought to be, doing what he ought to be doing. As a babe in Christ, I remember finding a church that seemed a good fit. Even more vivid is the memory of making a commitment to teach Sunday School for the first time. These memories are instances of one new believer finding his *niche*.

Often the definition of even commonly used terms such as *niche* reveals more than we might suppose when we take a close look at it. The *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* defines a *niche* as:

“a recess in a wall especially for a statue...a place, employment, or activity for which a person is best fitted; a habitat supplying the factors necessary for the existence of an organism or species”

The first part of the definition above might be considered as an allusion to the truism that it is in the church that the image and attributes of God should be most conspicuous. In other words, as believers collectively join their lives together in seeking to live out their faith, the world should be able to see who God is and what He looks like. Of course the image of God reflected in the church is, at best, only a poor reflection of the perfection of God, not to mention the goodness, mercy, holiness, and wisdom of God. Notwithstanding this, it is axiomatic that most of what the world will ever know of God is seen in and through particular churches.

The second part of the definition above reiterates the point made in chapter one, regarding Matthew 11:28-30. The church provides a place of labor and service unto God. Indeed, the church is a consecrated organism designed for that purpose. As a believer discovers his particular calling within the context of the local church, he finds his *niche*. He finds a place to be employed by his Master; he discovers the purpose to which God has called him.

Christians are not saved merely to be spared from the fiery torments of hell. They are saved to serve their God - to reside within a particular place.

It is a place of consecration in which the believer experiences the ongoing work of sanctification. Christians are to be actively engaged by serving God and actively worshipping Him. The idea is captured in identifying the occasion in which worship is offered each Lord's day as a *worship service*!

The third part of the definition above identifies a niche as “a habitat supplying the factors necessary for the existence of an organism or species.” It is difficult to imagine a better description of a healthy, biblical church. It should be a “habitat” that is inhabited by genuine, sincere believers - an environment in which Christ Himself is known and obeyed through the teaching and preaching of the gospel. This is the sort of habitat that is rich and fertile ground for the reproduction of the “species.” This is the sort of “habitat” in which believers thrive.

In the church, the means of grace are found – all those elements necessary for the sustenance and growth of a true follower of Christ. The teaching of the Word, the sacraments, loving discipline, prayer, fellowship, the singing of praises to God, encouragement and opportunities to employ one's spiritual gifts, are all means of grace which make up a habitat in which Christians not only subsist but prosper spiritually.

The church is the *niche* in which God places believers and in which believers find a home. Those who have been genuinely converted by God, those who subsequently seek to follow their Lord, do not have to be compelled or forced into God's church. Those who have been recreated in Christ soon discover that the local church is the place that they are “best fitted.” It is the environment in which they feel at home, hence, the common identification of a local congregation as a church home.

Varegatae

Chapter 5

“For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think... For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ...”

Romans 12:3-5

If the church is the *anvil* of God, then what should it look like? Should all churches be the same in appearance, shape, and size? These are legitimate questions that need to be addressed. Just as all *anvils* share certain characteristics related to their function, all churches share characteristics as well. If we change the essential character of the *anvil*, especially those features necessary for it to perform its function, we no longer have an *anvil*. The same is true of the local church. There will always be some degree of tension when balancing form and function. That tension represents the latitude and freedom biblical churches have as they seek to be what God has called them to be.

It might be appropriate to refer to the legitimate differences between churches as the *varegatae* of form. The word *variegated* is defined in *Webster’s Deluxe Unabridged Dictionary* as:

“to make varied in appearance by differences, as in colors; to make varied; to give variety to; to diversify”

It is a good thing to vary and diversify those aspects of church that do not affect its substantial or essential nature. Questions related to form and function tend to be viewed pragmatically by the church. This only becomes problematic when either the form and function begin to conflict with Scripture or when the functioning of the church ceases to be effectual.

For example, just as the size of *anvils* will vary depending on its intended purpose, the size of a church will vary depending on its objectives. While it may be difficult to determine the optimum size that a particular church ought to be, it is also true that it is possible to reach a point of diminishing returns in terms of size. In other words, a church can become too big to achieve its proper purpose of effectively shaping and preparing believers to serve Christ.

How big is too big? That is a question the leaders of a church ought to honestly and prayerfully consider. While God is the final architect of each

genuine Christian church, there may be a time when a church ought to consider fashioning another *anvil* (church) to God's glory. In a day in which the *megachurch serves as the model of spiritual success for most evangelicals, this is likely to be a controversial topic. Often such a discussion revolves more around men's egos than the glory of God, so it must be bathed in much prayer and personal reflection. This author's personal, though admittedly arbitrary opinion is that a church finds an adequate resource base to carry out most of its legitimate objectives when membership falls in the 300 to 500 range. Beyond this point, a church must develop an extraordinary infrastructure to retain the level of intimacy, nurturing, and accountability necessary for genuine discipleship to occur. Indeed, it may be impossible for a megachurch to do this no matter how gifted and creative its leadership is.

There will be many other significant questions to consider when determining what a church should look like. Questions regarding appearance, peripheral concerns, and philosophy of ministry fall within the legitimate *varegatae* of doing church so long as the proper function of the church is adequately served. It is also true that not all agree on where the essential or nonnegotiable characteristics of church end and where the peripheral matters begin. Yet if the leaders of a church unequivocally embrace and proclaim the gospel of Christ, the integrity of the Scriptures, the need for each believer to develop a Christian world and life view and purpose to demonstrate a commitment to the reformation principle *Soli Deo Gloria* (to God alone be the glory), the propensity for confusion and error is diminished.

Finally, one cannot look at the beauty of God's creation without being struck by the fact that God loves variety and diversity. There is a richness and *variegation* in nature that ought to stimulate within each of us creative and imaginative approaches to doing church. There is nothing stale or *blasé* in the various colors, forms, shapes, and textures of God's creation. It is ironic that God's people would be reluctant to pursue their objectives without a similar desire toward creativity and beauty.

The church is the *anvil* of God and while all biblical churches share certain things in common, there is room for variation and diversity. *Anvils* don't all look exactly alike, but when you are looking at an *anvil*, you should know the purpose for which it was created. The same should be true of all biblical churches in which God is honored and glorified.

*Most consider a megachurch to have 2,000 or more members.

To Invert

Chapter 6

“Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance...”

Luke 3:8

Most of what we know and understand of life is determined by our experiences, observations, temperamental predisposition, and the way our families reared us. This is as it should be. However, as Christians we soon discover that many of the things we thought we knew are wrong.

There are numerous examples that might be offered, but for the purpose of this work, we will focus on the concept of success. The world has a concept of success that is opposite to that explained by Christ. According to Christ, to be great (successful) in the Kingdom of God requires a dramatic inversion* of much of what we thought we knew of greatness. Jesus explained this in His response to James and John’s request that they have a place of honor in His kingdom.

“You do not know what you are asking for...You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Mark 10:38, 42-45

Here Christ points out the difference in how the world seeks to achieve greatness and how those who would be great in God’s Kingdom must seek it.

The process of inverting our natural inclinations and learning to serve is a painful one. Once again, the metaphor of the church as the *anvil* of God is appropriate. The idea of serving as a means of pleasing God does not come naturally to fallen man, nor does it come easily to regenerate man. Old ideas and habits die hard, especially if those old ideas and habits flatter our fleshly nature.

The words of Christ as recorded by Mark become an effective hammer when applied in the context of an active and sincere commitment to the

church. In that framework, believers serve one another in the midst of the reality of their selfish proclivities. In other words, those we serve may take advantage of us, despise us, and certainly they are unlikely to appreciate us, at least to the extent that we feel we deserve. When this occurs in a place in which we can easily move on, we will, in all likelihood, do just that. In the church, our commitment to the Body should be of a degree that makes it difficult to move on.

Another example of the inversion of ideas that occurs in Scripture is the notion of how one achieves fulfillment in life. Jesus said:

“And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it.”

Matthew 10:38-39

Here Jesus explains that one finds his life only when he loses it. In the mind of the world, this sounds like nonsense. In the context of Jesus’ own life, it is the wisdom of God lived out.

The Apostle Paul explains the essence of this concept in his letter to the Philippians. He writes:

“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant...”

Philippians 2:3-7

If anyone was entitled to insist on being served it was, of course, Jesus. Yet He took the role and function of a servant in submission to the eternal purposes of the Godhead. He served those who did not deserve to be served, thus He modeled for us the manner we ought to approach life and one another.

Serving others in the context of the church or in the world is seldom our preference, but it is our calling. In the church, or upon the *anvil* of God, the process of sanctification is a slow and deliberate molding of the character of Christ in our lives. It is the divine alternative to being “conformed to this world.” (Romans 12:2)

*According to *Webster's Deluxe Unabridged Dictionary*, to invert means "to turn upside down" or "to change to the opposite direction."

To Love

Chapter 7

This I command you, that you love one another.”

John 15:17

The word love is used hundreds of times in Scripture. It is commanded, encouraged, explained, and defined throughout the Bible. When Christian love is predominant in a church, it is described as “the perfect bond of unity” by Paul in his letter to Colossae. He writes:

“And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”

Colossians 3:12-14, NAS

Here the Apostle has explained what love looks like when it is lived out in the covenant community we call the church. It changes relationships within the church, making self-centered people willing vessels of forgiveness.

It is noteworthy that Paul makes a connection between the believer’s election (“have been chosen”, v12) and the exhortation to “*put on love*” (v. 14). This reflects the simple truth that our willingness to love others is the proper and rational response to the fact that God chose to love us. Further, the actions that result from our response of loving one another is clearly seen by others. Likewise, our refusal to love one another is obvious as well in the conflicts and divisiveness that results when Christian love is absent.

It is important to understand that the kind of love God commands is not necessarily an emotion, and it certainly is not mere sentimentality. It is a willful, benevolent activity to the benefit of others. This is clear as we look at the Greek term which is used most often as we are commanded to love one another. It is *agapao* (*agape* – noun). *Agape* is defined in *Vine’s Expository Dictionary* as:

“Christian love, whether exercised toward the brethren, or toward men generally is not an impulse from the feelings, it does not always run with the natural inclinations, nor does it spend itself only upon those for whom some affinity is discovered.

Love seeks the welfare of all; Romans 15:2, and works no ill to any, 13:8-10; love seeks opportunity to do good to all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith; Gal. 6:10”

The believer is to love and “do good...especially toward them that are of the household of the faith.” The church is the first place where love should be demonstrated by the actions of one believer toward another.

The best expression of love (*agape*) is the willingness to serve. Jesus makes this clear in His interchange with Peter, recorded in the gospel of John.* Jesus responds to Peter’s profession that he loves Him with the instruction to “tend My sheep.” (John 21:17, NAS) To expand on Christ’s response, *if you really love me then you ought to be willing to serve my church.* Implied in Christ’s instruction to “tend” the people of God is the employment of spiritual gifts, which have been given just for that purpose. Though Peter could not have fully understood what Christ meant at the moment of this dialogue, after Pentecost Peter would receive the gifts necessary to obey Christ’s instruction. With this in mind, Jesus was telling Peter that all that would be given to him was a trust which he was to invest wisely and diligently. This investment would take the form of service rendered unto God, through service in and to the Body of Christ.

*This author recommends William Hendricksen’s excellent *New Testament Commentary-The Gospel of John.* (Baker) His comments on why he agrees with those who see a distinction in the meaning of the two verbs used for love in this passage are excellent. (page 500) Earlier Hendricksen explains that Jesus changed the particular term he used for love as an accommodation to Peter. (page 448) Regarding verse 17 he writes:

“This time Jesus descends to Peter’s own level, using the very term for love which Peter had used. The Lord seems to doubt whether Simon really had even such humble affection as he was claiming.”

Conclusion

The church is the *anvil* of God and it is upon this divine instrument of sanctification that God fashions us into useful vessels to His glory. An anonymous poet expressed it this way:

When God wants to drill a man, and thrill a man,
and skill a man;

When God wants to mold a man to play the
noblest part;

When He yearns with all His heart to create
so great and bold a man
that all the world might be amazed.

Watch His methods, watch His ways.

How He ruthlessly perfects

Whom He royally elects

How He hammers and hurts Him

and with mighty blows converts him,
into tried shapes of clay,
that only God understands.

While his tortured heart is crying,
and he lifts beseeching hands

How He bends but never breaks,
when His good He undertakes.

How He uses whom He chooses
and with mighty acts induces him
to try His splendor out.

God knows what he's about!

The “mighty blows” are most effective when administered to “shapes of clay” which are firmly set upon the *anvil* of God.