



The State of the Church & You

Gospel Culture, Part 2

Romans 12:3-8

David Sunday

January 28, 2018

The Scripture I'm clinging to today is Romans 15:5-7: *"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."* God is the God of endurance and encouragement, and He is able to work so that out of the diverse body of people, we will live in such harmony that with one voice we're bringing glory to Him.

I'd like us to pray together the prayer our Savior taught His disciples. Let's acknowledge to our God and Father the glory that is due His name. May His name be hallowed in all the earth and may He work through us that His Kingdom would come and His will be done. May He work in us all those attitudes of dependency on Him, the recognition of our need for His grace and forgiveness, that we may desire to walk in faithfulness to Him, protected from the world, the flesh and the devil.

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

(Matthew 6:9-13)

You are worthy, our great God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We worship You today. We pray that You would work in us all that is necessary for us to live in harmony with one another, that together with one voice this church would increasingly bring glory to You. We pray now, Lord, for the illumination of the Holy Spirit on our minds and hearts, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit upon the preaching of Your Word. As we open Your Word, Lord, show us wonderful things and conform us more and more to the character of Your Son, Jesus, in Whose name we pray. Amen.

It's good to be together in one service today for our State of the Church Sunday. We hope that everyone who is visiting will get a taste of the joy we have in being a community of believers that Jesus has gathered by His grace to bring glory to God. I also want to say a word to those of you who regularly attend New Covenant Bible Church, but who have not yet become members. I want you to know we value you too, and we're glad that you're here. We're hoping that today you'll get a nudge from the Holy Spirit to make the decision to explicitly covenant with this body of believers and become a member of this church.

Today we'll be looking at Romans 12:3-8 on the theme, "The State of the Church and You." Let's read God's Word together. Remember, this is in the context of Paul's appeal, that in view of God's mercies, we would present ourselves as a sacrifice to the Lord, living holy and well-pleasing in His sight, not being conformed to this world but transformed by the renewal of our minds. And now he's going to tell us what that involves, starting with our life together in the body of believers.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

This is God's Word. Praise Him for it!

My aim today is to persuade each and every one of us who is a covenant member of this church that the state of this church depends on you. I don't mean it's dependent on you alone. God is the only indispensable Person in the universe. But what I mean is that the church is not an organization run by a few paid people, or a small team of highly dedicated volunteers. You are the church. You are God's people. Technically we don't go to church—we go to be with the church. That's what we're doing right now. We've come to be with Christ's church. That's why there were no church buildings in the first century, but there were churches that changed the world.

Each of us is affecting the state of this church. We're all contributing to the present state of things. So don't observe this State of the Church Sunday the way you might observe the State

of the Union address on Tuesday night by watching passively, maybe even critically, in your living room. Think of yourself as an active participant. Realize that the state of this church depends in some way on you. No one here is a neutral observer. No one is just along for the ride. Ultimately each of us is either contributing to the health and flourishing of this church, or we are actually having a detrimental effect.

Think about the passengers in a car. They don't really affect the driving—they're merely being carried along. But that's different than, say, on a football team, because there each player is essential. If you're not doing your job, it's going to hurt your team, and if you're doing your job, it's going to help your team. That's the way the church is. So in what ways does the state of New Covenant Bible Church depend on you and me?

The state of the church depends on how you think.

The first way is found in Romans 12:3. The state of the church depends on how you think. In verse three, the word "think" actually occurs four times. If we translated it woodenly, it would read like this: "Do not think more highly than what is necessary to think, but think in order to think soberly." In other words, when you come to be with the church, you're thinking. You've got to be thinking a lot. What's going on in your mind when you walk into church actually has an effect on everyone around you. If I'm not thinking rightly about myself, it's going to diminish the joy of our church. If I'm thinking rightly about myself, I can contribute to the health and the flourishing of our church.

So how should we think about ourselves? I like how Tim Keller says it: "Don't think too highly of yourself, and don't think too lowly of yourself." By God's grace, Paul says to us in verse three, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think." John Stott observes, "In the church, pride is our greatest enemy; humility is our greatest friend." It's interesting how with humility, those who have the most of it are least aware of it, and those who think they have it most are the ones who need it the worst. Pride is hard to spot in ourselves. It's easy to see it in other people, but it's even harder to kill it in ourselves.

I like the way Jason Meyer illustrates this. He describes a conversation with himself that he might have after a meeting at church. He says to himself, "That meeting went really well. I think the turning point might have been when I asked that question, which no one else had thought to ask before. Wait a minute. That was such a prideful thought! It sounds like I am taking credit for the meeting going well. I am such a prideful person. I hate my pride." Meanwhile, three seconds later, "I fight pride pretty hard. I'm glad that I caught that initial prideful thought. I wonder if other people are as aware of their pride and fight it as hard as I do.

Wait a minute. It just happened again. I'm taking pride in my awareness of pride. Oh, deliver me from this body of death, Lord Jesus. Thank You God, that You give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now, judging from your response, I'm thinking this sounds like a familiar conversation to you. I think you realize, along with me, that this is going to be a lifelong battle—a battle you will fight by remembering how very kind and gracious and merciful God has been to you in Christ. Remember, everything in this chapter is "in view of God's mercies."

C.S. Lewis famously pointed out that pride is the one vice in the world of which no one is free, but which everyone loathes when they see it in someone else. He suggests that hardly anyone except Christians are even aware of their pride and are fighting their pride. Lewis said, "There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault of which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it in ourselves, the more we dislike it in others."

In fact, if you want to find out how proud you are, the easiest way is to ask yourself, "How much do I dislike it when other people snub me or refuse to take notice of me or shove their oar in or patronize me or show off?" How do you feel? How do you respond to those things? I want you to ask the Holy Spirit to give you an accurate self-awareness. It's one of the most vital things you bring to the health of this church. Without an accurate self-awareness, we do harm to the life of God's people. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you this awareness.

Realize that you are tempted, and I'm tempted, to exaggerate our own importance, to think too highly of our own abilities, to care too much for our own rights, to think we're more wise, more gifted, more spiritual, more powerful than others. We've got to fight against this way of thinking. We've got to be vigilant against pride. And that's one of the best gifts you can give to your church. Be a person who's fighting pride. Be asking the Holy Spirit to give you an accurate self-awareness. Will you do this? Not just today, but make it a regular part of your prayer life.

Do you really want to make some headway in fighting pride? Then why not invite some candid feedback from those who know you best? What if each of us were asking trusted friends and parents and children and coworkers to help us see our blind spots? Ask someone close to you, "Would you help me see my blind spots? Would you help me see areas where I can grow in grace?" That might be a breakthrough in your life.

Maybe some of you have gone months without honestly inviting feedback from someone else. "What do you see in me that I can't see in myself?" And if that's you, would you change in that area? Would you make that a regular practice as part of your battle against pride? One of the first things Paul tells us is don't think too highly of yourself.

On the other hand, don't think too lowly either. The point of him saying this in verse three is not to put yourself down, as if you're worthless or don't have anything to offer. No. Look at what he says in the end of verse three, "*Think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*" So if we are thinking according to the measure of faith, faith realizes that everything we have comes from God. It's all by the grace of God, so there's no room for boasting in ourselves.

Here's a little equation to help visualize this:

$$\text{More Faith} = \text{Less Pride} + \text{More Humility}$$

Faith in Jesus is what all of us have in common. This is how we can all live in harmony with one another. Regardless of our backgrounds and abilities, we are all sinners who have trusted in Christ and His work on the cross to save us. We're all loved by God in Christ. We're all His children. So if we let the grace of God and the faith that we have in Jesus be the standard by which we measure ourselves, we will not think too highly of ourselves, nor will we think too lowly of ourselves. We will think with sober judgment.

This right thinking will make us eager to minister to one another. We will want to use our differing gifts and personalities, backgrounds and abilities to build up the body, making it strong. So a day like this is a good day for each of us to take some stock of ourselves in how we're thinking. Ask yourself, "Am I looking down on anyone in the body of Christ? Do I look down on people because they're different—too young or too old, too extroverted or too introverted, too rich or too poor, a different race or gender, having a disability, socially awkward or too popular? Am I looking down on anyone in the body of Christ? Am I living as if I don't need others in the body? I'm independent—I can do it."

There's even a subtly prideful way of being so other-centered that you don't actually reveal much of yourself to others or express neediness to others. You keep others at arm's length. Are you preoccupied with how others view you and treat you? Are you viewing the church as a consumer, looking for what you can get, but thinking very little of what you're called to give? Have you forgotten that you're here in this church by God's grace, united with God's people through a faith that we all share in common? We need to think about these things, because the way we think affects the state of this church.

The state of the church depends on how you participate.

The second thing we want to look at is this, from Romans 12:4-8. The state of the church depends on how you participate. There are two core convictions I try to emphasize every time we

bring in new members. Conviction number one, you need the church, and conviction number two, the church needs you. When God saved you, He united you so closely with His Son Jesus Christ that you are now a member of Christ's body.

It's what Paul is stressing in verses four and five. We've gotten so used to this body metaphor we hardly think about what it means. So let me put it graphically. In order for a body to work properly, it must be joined together. Can you imagine carrying your fingers around in your pocket, just taking them out and putting them on whenever you need them? Can you imagine how grotesque a body looks if it's cut up into a bunch of different pieces? But when it's all joined together, each part in its place, the human body is beautiful.

Even the nose has beauty if it's properly positioned on the face. But if you opened your drawer and found a nose in it, you would probably scream in horror. Noses aren't supposed to be there. They're supposed to be on your face. So if you say, "I don't need other members in the body," you've just become like a nose that's gotten out of joint or disconnected from the face. And if you say, "Other Christians don't need me," you're like the leg that's become paralyzed and you're going to hold the body back from being able to move.

Look at what God's Word says in verse five: we are all "*individually members of one another.*" We belong to one another. So if I hold myself back from offering service to the body, I'm depriving the body of the nourishment and strength it needs to flourish.

I read something this week that struck me, so allow me to paraphrase the concept: "We are called to give ourselves as completely to a local church as Jesus gave Himself when He died to save His church." That's what being a living sacrifice is—to give yourself as completely to the church as Jesus did when He died to save His church. Otherwise we're out of sync with the Head of our body, Who is Jesus. A living sacrifice to God says, "Lord, I want to give myself to You—all of me—all that I have, all that I am, to be used in Your service. Make me a servant to Your body."

Romans 12:6-8 speaks to how we've all been given various gifts by the Holy Spirit. What all these gifts have in common is that they're all given by grace: "*Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...*" (verse six6). They're all meant to be used, not for selfish purposes, but for the building up of the body. We are to use these gifts as servants. The key is to love people and to be willing to serve them. You learn what your gifts are, not so much by taking a test, but by getting involved with people, loving them, exercising your gifts to serve people.

So for the next few minutes I want to cast your vision ahead to the New Covenant Bible Church of the future—the next generation. I want us to dream a little bit about what God could do here, because I hope we're laboring here in such a way that this church will be stronger one

generation from now, two generations from now. I hope we're not just thinking about right now and about ourselves.

While on sabbatical this past summer, I was thinking that it's been 26 years since I started with one of the churches that formed this union. I was really young then and I've seen God do some wonderful things through His church—mostly what God has done in me to sanctify and change me through fellowship with you. I got to thinking, “Where will I be 26 years from now?” Of course, no one knows where we'll be 26 years from now. Quite a few of us, I imagine, will be in heaven—I could be among them. But if the Lord lets me live another 26 years, I'll be 73 years old. No way! That's not so young anymore. It just struck me how quickly that time goes.

So whatever years God gives us as a church, I want us to live them with intentionality. I want us to constantly keep God's mercies in view and to be so moved by the grace of God in Christ that we will believe in a God Who is able to do far more abundantly above all we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). Might our faith in the God Who is so gracious and so kind move us to take exploits of faith, even some risks, in order to see the mission of Christ advanced in this region.

What could God do here?

When I came back from sabbatical in September, we started talking as elders about how we would define our goals for the next 20 years. What would our long-long-long-range vision be? Twenty years is a long time with a lot of variables. What would we like to be asking God to do through us? Here is the vision we arrived at for every covenant member. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is what we want for each and every one of us.

We will labor to equip every covenant member to be:

- (a) committed to prayer
- (b) growing into maturity in Christ
- (c) actively participating in a gospel community (small group)
- (d) engaged in personal ministry to actively move others one step closer to Christ
- (e) serving in their vocation in this world as a Kingdom disciple

This is “ground zero” for everything else. This is where we all have to be. Along with these things, we're envisioning what it will take for our children and youth to be well-grounded in gospel-centered doctrine, with godly character, love for the church, plus engagement in Christ's mission. We're thinking about how we'd like to serve our community. We want New Covenant to

bring such blessing to the Fox Valley that if we disappeared, people in St. Charles would be saying, “Where did they go? They’ve been blessing us. We miss that.”

We want this to be a church where future elders, future pastors and future missionary leaders are being multiplied for Christ’s church, where they can be mentored and trained here like we’re doing with Blake Glosson right now. We want to be partnering with other churches to see gospel-centered churches planted and multiplying throughout the Chicagoland area. And one more thing we’re praying about is this: We’re so hungry to see God make New Covenant a body of believers who are a living illustration of the racial, ethnic and gender harmony that can only come through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, some of you are thinking, “I’m going to send them an email this week and ask, ‘What is your strategy to bring these goals to reality?’” I’ll give you the answer right now. We don’t really have one yet. This is something that’s going to have to be worked through patiently over time—that’s why I said 20 years. The point of today is this: each of you plays a vital part. What our church becomes 20 years from now is connected vitally to how you and I are engaging today. So look over that list of spiritual gifts for a couple minutes in 12:6-8. The list isn’t exhaustive, nor is it mutually exclusive. Everyone who is united by Christ is gifted by the Holy Spirit. He might gift you in a certain way today to meet the needs of today, then He might surprise you by gifting you in a new way a few years from now to meet the needs then. Where do you see yourself in this list today?

Do you have the gift of prophecy? This doesn’t mean you’re able to foretell the future, like an Old Testament prophet. In the New Testament, if you reference 1 Corinthians 14:3, the gift of prophecy is a gift of being able to speak to people on behalf of God in accordance with the truths of Scripture in a way that builds them up and encourages and consoles them. It’s a beautiful gift. This is a gift that can be exercised in public ways, but also in more personal and private ways, one on one or in small groups. But how precious it is to be able to speak words of life and truth that encourage and console God’s people. If you have that gift, use it. And church, may we not despise prophecies, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5, for to do so would be to quench the Spirit of God.

Do you have the gift of serving? It’s beautiful how so many of the gifts in this list speak of practical ways we can aid one another. Someone with this gift could be an administrator, or a deacon, or have a meal ministry. This could be the type of person who’s always looking for ways to help—whether in the parking lot, or with a young family who needs babysitting help, or with people who aren’t talking to anyone. People with this gift are always team players. They don’t

need the spotlight. We're not serving to look spiritual or gain influence. They serve because they delight in meeting others' needs—and that's a precious gift.

Are you gifted to teach? Has the Holy Spirit enabled you to make God's truth clear and understandable, so that people learn God's plans, purposes, will and character as He's revealed Himself in the Bible? This gift is always needed—starting in the nursery, with our children and youth, all the way up to the seniors' ministry—because Christians are lifelong learners. We never get beyond the need of being taught. This gift is needed in the global church around the world. If you have this gift, use it in the power of the Spirit to serve others.

What about the gift of exhortation or encouragement? These are precious people who come alongside others to help them put into practice what they have been taught. This is the person who holds you accountable to take the next step. "So, what are you going to do with that Bible study you just did? What are you going to do with that sermon you just heard?" This is the person who helps you, not just to be a hearer of God's Word, but a doer of God's Word (James 1:22-23). I think good preaching is a mix of teaching and exhortation, but this can't only come from preaching. It happens in other ways too. It happens through counseling, coming alongside others and helping work through life issues. And it's not just formal counseling, but in informal ways—believers coming alongside one another, speaking into each other's lives, living side by side, day by day, saying, "I want to help you." Live out the Christian life.

This is why right now we're putting a lot of effort into developing our gospel communities, because we want to do more than just learn as a church—we want to live out our faith. We want to care for one another, but we also want to help one another grow as disciples and get engaged in Christ's mission. This requires personal ministry—not just sitting and listening, but engaging with one another. Our small groups are a great way to put the gift of encouragement and exhortation into practice.

What about the gift of giving? We're all told to give, but people with this gift enjoy giving in disproportionate ways. And they have special wisdom. They know how to steward those gifts in ways that are very fruitful in the lives of God's people in His church. They're generous and they're glad to be.

Then there's leadership. Here's a gift that's not held in high regard today. I read a survey yesterday about the trust level people have in their church leaders and it was discouraging. It's not very high right now. We struggle with authority in our culture, partly because so many leaders have abused their authority. But if we're going to go anywhere as a church, it's going to take people who have a vision and who are able to inspire others to follow them. It's going to take leaders. If the Spirit has gifted you to lead, you'll do it not for power or for perks, but unselfishly,

as a servant, with diligence and zeal. Today we're asking you to affirm Mike Jacoby as a new shepherd-leader (an elder) for our church. I'm confident that he will lead in the power of the Spirit with diligence and zeal.

Aren't you glad that the list ends with this beautiful word mercy? It's because we all need it, don't we? I'm thankful the Holy Spirit gifts people who are moved to those who are poor, sick, weak, in prison, addicted, vulnerable and forgotten by society. He fills these dear servants with compassion, so that as they show mercy, they don't get compassion fatigue—they get glad. They love showing mercy. They do it with cheerfulness. They're not wearied in well-doing.

Friends, we have God-sized goals as a church, and they'll get bigger and bigger as God makes His mission for us clearer and clearer. I was thinking about what Natalie said at our mission banquet last week. She said she's glad to be living in a place in Southeast Asia where if anything happens, it's clearly going to be God Who did the work. That's very clear where Josh and Natalie live. But do you realize, friends, we live in that kind of place too. The only difference is we don't think of it that way as much, do we? We're way too self-reliant.

But really, anything lasting that happens here for the glory of God is going to have to come through the Holy Spirit. If we realize that, we will pray. We will think of ourselves with sober judgment. We will dive in with eagerness to participate, using our gifts because we believe the Holy Spirit is working through the exercise of those gifts to build up Christ's body. "Make me a servant, O Lord." Will you pray that? But then what will you do when you are treated like a servant? It's been wisely said by Michael Bird, "An easy way to tell if you have a servant heart is how you act when you're treated like a servant." This is what Jesus is calling us to in this passage, so let's pray together to that end.

Lord, we're asking You today to make us willing to be treated like servants, so that we are fruitful for Your glory. O Father, use my ransomed life in any way You choose. I present myself as a living sacrifice to You, for the good of Your church. Let my song forever be that my only boast is You. Because whatever good is done through me has come only from You. You're the great One Who works in us that which is pleasing in Your sight, for Your glory. We pray that You will continue doing that now as we go through this week. Be glorified in this church. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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