



Love the Church: Her Leadership -- Elders, Deacons & the Priesthood of All Believers

David Sunday

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Let's pray.

Good Shepherd, we praise You and thank You that when we were wandering close to the cliffs, You did not leave us to fend for ourselves. You left the 99 and came after each one of us individually. You rescued, redeemed us and brought us safely back into Your fold. Now we pray that You would shepherd us through Your Word. Help us receive the good You have for us in Your Word today with gladness. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Today is the last of five sermons on loving the church. Next week we're going to start a series through the book of Esther. A great way to prepare for that would be to read Esther this week. It is a fascinating and unusual book in the Old Testament. But today, we're talking about leadership in the local church—God's design for order in His church. I know that as we approach this subject, some of you are thinking, "That sounds about as pleasant as going to an oral surgeon for a root canal. Leadership and order in the church? It sounds kind of dry and barren."

But I was reminded this week of a theologian who said, "The Spirit of Christ brings order as well as ardor." That word "ardor" means great warmth of feeling, enthusiasm, passion. So order in the church doesn't need to be a dry and barren subject. A well-ordered church can be an on-fire, lively, energetic church which is what we're aiming for here. The best way to inspire ardor in a talk about order is to remember Who the Designer and Director of the church is. So let's read together what the Holy Spirit says about Jesus in Colossian 1:18: *"And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent."*

We are talking about the living body over which Christ is the head. We are talking about His authority, leadership and love for His people. That means our attitude toward leadership in Christ's church is ultimately a reflection of our attitude toward Christ Himself. It all comes down to this: can you trust the head of His church? Can you trust that if Jesus loved His church so much to die for her, He will love her enough today to provide for her the leadership that is designed to bring good to God's people?

This is the main claim of this morning sermon. When God's Word is talking about God's design for leadership in His church, it is talking about God's design to bless us and do good to us. God is good in providing His church, He is good in gathering us into His church and He is good in every detail of His design for His church. So we're seeing God's goodness, Christ's love and Christ's wisdom when we talk about order in His church. This morning we're going to spend the bulk of our time on one main question, then we're going to apply the teaching in two different directions.

What does God's Word teach us about His good design for the leadership of His church?

To answer this main question, we're going to start with Philippians 1. Paul begins his letter to the church in Philippi like this: *"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons."* I want you to notice that word "with." The overseers and deacons are with the saints in Christ Jesus.

In other words, if you are a leader in Christ's church, you must see yourself as an equal with those you are leading. Not as superior, not in an elite class, not someone entitled to special treatment—no. You are an equal whose function is to be a servant to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are your brothers and sisters and with whom you share friendship, fellowship and mutual love. But that doesn't mean that leadership roles in Christ's church don't matter. Otherwise, why would Paul be pointing them out in his greeting? He points out two roles.

First, he names the overseers. That word is describing the office of elder in Christ's church. It's not a separate role. Elders are designed by God to provide oversight to the ministry of the church. The Bible uses a variety of other names to designate this office in addition to elders and overseers. In Ephesians 4:11, they're called pastors and teachers. In 1 Peter 5 they're called shepherds. In 1 Timothy 5:17 they're called those who rule. And in Hebrews 13:7 they're called leaders.

The point we need to grasp is that in the New Testament, all of these words are referring to one and the same office. Elders are an essential part of God's good design for the oversight, shepherding, leadership, care, protection and especially the instruction of Christ's church. It's noteworthy that wherever the apostles went to preach the gospel, they would plant churches and appoint elders. We see this in Acts 14:23, where Paul and Barnabas have been planting churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. God's Word says, *"When they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord."* The goal of the apostles was not merely to see individuals saved; their goal was to see churches planted and established. These weren't perfect churches, but they were communities where God's people would experience

God's blessing. The apostles would never move on from a freshly planted church without making sure that provision was there for leadership in the church. They would always appoint elders to oversee the church.

Notice the Bible says they appointed elders, plural. You're going to see that all the time in the New Testament. They never just appointed a single elder. It was always a plurality. Nowhere in the New Testament do you find a church run by a solo pastor or a one-man band. The needs of the church are too great for one man to manage on his own and trust me, the vulnerabilities of our own hearts are too great for leadership to be invested in just one man. So there needs to be mutual support, mutual accountability and mutual challenge of one another. Jesus insures this by delegating His authority to a team of shepherds, a plurality of elders—who together share in the oversight of Christ's church. So we've seen that the apostles planted churches and appointed elders—always in plurality.

Now let's talk a little about the qualifications of elders. There are three pastoral letters in the New Testament that teach on what a pastor-elder is to do and what he's to be like. Two of them to Pastor Timothy and Pastor Titus. I want you to turn to Titus right now and see what Paul says to Pastor Titus about the elders, beginning in Titus 1:4:

⁴ To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior. ⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

We could go into detail on every one of these qualifications, but we're not going to do that today. What I want you to see, and what stands out, is that in all the lists of qualifications of elders—whether it's in Titus, Timothy, Peter or in Acts 20—what stands out is that godly character in the home and before all people, a firm grasp on God's Word with the ability to teach and the courage to confront error are the main qualifications of an elder.

The church is like a family. Paul calls it the household of God. Elders are to be father-like in their care of God's family. What all of these lists have in common is the primacy of the elder's

character. He is to be a father-like man who is not perfect, but who is mature, tested and with a proven character. God is not looking for men who are hugely successful in running a business but who are not marked by conspicuous holy character. God wants shepherds who increasingly resemble the Chief Shepherd, so that when people are around them, they walk away thinking, “That man reminds me of Jesus.”

God wants shepherds who also smell like sheep because they’re hanging around with God’s people, coming alongside them, getting dirty in their messes, helping them in their problems and encouraging them in their walk. That’s why at the beginning of every elder meeting in this church, we read an elder covenant together. The first thing we do in that covenant is we remind ourselves what we are here for. It starts with what we do: “We shepherd the flock of God whom He purchased by His blood, as those who have been set apart by His Spirit to serve Christ’s people with our prayer, presence, teaching and planning.” That’s what we do.

Then we remind ourselves how we should make decisions—not usually like we’re in an emergency room needing to do something immediately, or like we’re in a board room looking for efficiency and monetary wisdom. Sometimes you have to make those kinds of decisions. But mainly we need to be patient as we follow the lead of Jesus in making decisions for His church.

After that, we read our biblical mandate in 1 Peter 5. We never start an elder meeting without hearing these words from God. Every time we hear them, we are reminded afresh of some aspect of this holy calling and it moves us to pray for grace. We hear these words at the beginning of our meetings. The Apostle Peter says in verse one, “*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder...*” Peter—the one about whom Jesus said, “On this rock I will build My church” (Matthew 16:13-20)—says, “I’m a fellow elder with you. I’m one of you.”

He goes on to say he is “*a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed.*” We can never lose sight of that. There is a glory that is going to be revealed and we shepherd the flock of God in view of that coming glory. Then he says, “*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*” In other words, “Be among your local church. Get to know them. Shepherd them. Don’t strive to be in a bigger church up the road—be with these sheep, shepherd and care for them.”

Peter continues, “*Exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*” Praise God for that reward. “*Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’*”

After we read that, we talk a bit about what it looks like to be humble, loving, submissive to one another on our team. Then at the end of our covenant, we tell ourselves this: “The thing we are doing is about Jesus, not us.” That’s the point of all this, friends. Elders are under the authority of Christ. To be a leader in Christ’s church, you must first be a follower of Jesus. You must be a man who’s learning to walk as Jesus walked on the road to the cross, before the crown. And your walk with Jesus must be mature enough, consistent enough and compelling enough that God’s people in Christ’s church want to follow your example.

I love how Andrew Wilson summarizes what the Bible teaches about elders:

An elder is a pastor is a shepherd is an overseer is a teacher is a leader, and in many ways the unifying concept underlying the biblical material is that of guardian. Our job, as elders, is to protect the church from harm—from danger, dispersal, division, drift, deviant doctrine, disobedience, destruction and ultimately the devil—while we wait for the day when Jesus returns, conquers the accuser and takes His rightful place as the Shepherd to end all shepherds.

Amen. I’m inspired by that. But that’s a tall order. That’s a job bigger than any man can handle.

It’s so important that elders not get distracted from this momentous task that Jesus appointed another office in the church to come alongside the elders to assist them in their ministry. Remember back in Philippians 1, after the overseers, who did Paul name? The deacons. Even though we don’t see the word deacon in Acts 6, most people think that’s where we find the seedbed of this office that developed in the church.

In Acts 6, a dispute erupted. The Greek widows were complaining that they were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The Hebrew widows were being shown favoritism, so this was a problem. To solve this problem, they said, “We need men full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit, men of good repute.” These deacons were chosen to manage this practical need so the apostles (elders) could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

The deacon ministry is one of practical service, meeting the needs of God’s people, often dealing with benevolent needs or caring for the poor and widows. It’s a ministry that requires a high degree of spiritual maturity and vitality. Deacons are to be people full of faith and the Holy Spirit. This ministry of deacons is crucial for the unity of the body. Can you imagine what would have happened if the apostles had to handle all those needs on their own? If that had to be, the church would have had divisions and strife, even racial disharmony, people’s practical needs would

have been left unattended, prayer and the ministry of the Word would have been diluted and growth would have been stifled.

So the New Testament establishes two offices for the care and flourishing of Christ's church. One is an office of oversight, leadership, shepherding, prayer and teaching. That's the office of elder. The other is an office of service, benevolence and practical administration. That's the office of deacon.

Deacons are not rulers or governors in the church, they're not the second house of the legislature and do not hold teaching authority in the church. But their role is vital to the health and flourishing of the church. Without them, the elders would be distracted, diverted from the ministry of prayer and teaching, so for their invaluable service, the deacons are promised a special reward in Scripture.

I want us to encourage our deacons this morning who labor diligently among us. We're so thankful for them. Just this very week, they were helping a woman in our church whose basement had flooded and she couldn't clean it up herself. The deacons want us to be a family who is not afraid to express our needs and not afraid to ask for help. They serve very faithfully.

So in 1 Timothy 3, after Paul lists the character qualifications of deacons—which are just like the character of an elder, except that the deacons don't need to be apt to teach—then he speaks a special word of encouragement to them in verse 13: *“For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”* I want every deacon in this room can be encouraged that his labor is not in vain. Deacons, we are thankful for you, for your work and your service on behalf of the church.

We've seen that the Bible is very clear that churches need to have elders and deacons. They're part of God's good design. But the Bible is less clear about the precise way the church should be structured. Let's think about this for a minute. We're not going to spend a long time on this, but I want you to be aware of four different ways churches tend to structure their government today. Keep in mind that we're not talking about denominations here—we're talking about types of church government.

First the **episcopal model**. This word comes from the word that means overseer or bishop. Under this model, each church has pastors, then various parishes join together and form what's called a diocese. Over that group of churches, there's a bishop who oversees all the pastors of those churches, then over that bishop there's an archbishop who oversees all the bishops. So in the episcopal model, a significant measure of authority rests outside the local church.

Then there's the **presbyterian model**. The word presbyterian comes from the Greek word for elder. In presbyterian churches, the decision-making body for the church is a group of

ruling and teaching elders. They've been affirmed by the congregation and each congregation has a number of elders—including the main teaching pastor—who come together and form a presbytery which oversees a group of churches. Then members from each presbytery will be sent as delegates to the general assembly, which meets about once a year and oversees the denomination as a whole. That's the second model.

The third model is what is called **independent elder-led churches**. That means they function a lot like a presbyterian church on the local level. Elders are affirmed by the congregation to be the decision-making body of the church, but there's no higher denominational structure.

The fourth model is **congregational**. This means the members of the congregation are the decision-making authority in the church. The scope of their decision-making authority differs from church to church, but it's the congregation who has the final authority.

Now, before I say what kind of church New Covenant is, I want us to put this in a healthy perspective. First of all, we've got to realize that any of these forms can be valid. God has blessed churches under all these systems of government. The Bible does not give enough detailed prescriptions for anyone to claim, "My system of church government is the biblical way and all the others are unbiblical." No. That would be hubris.

The second thing we need to realize is that each system has its flaws. There are pitfalls in all these systems. It's kind of like what Winston Churchill said: "Democracy is the worst form of government, other than all the other forms." Every system has its flaws. Churches can thrive and churches can fall apart—and they do fall apart—under these various systems. The best we can do is try, with the Holy Spirit's help, to discern as closely as possible what we think the Bible is teaching about how Christ's church should be governed, then respect other churches who have discerned and adopted a different system. Because, friends, without humility, without love, without dependence on the Holy Spirit, without prayer, it doesn't matter what kind of church government you have. We need God's blessing and He blesses all these types of churches.

So what kind of governing system is New Covenant Bible Church? We're the third kind. We are an independent, elder-led church. We don't belong to a denomination, so there's no presbytery above us. Our church is elder led. By that, we mean that a plurality of elders is the decision-making body of the church. That doesn't mean that elders can do whatever they want. The elders have a responsibility to be accountable to the congregation. We are required to seek congregational affirmation on major decisions—and we're going to do that tonight in the membership meeting. We do that with the affirmation of elders and deacons, with the annual budget and with big financial decisions like the buying or selling of property. In our church, it is the elders' responsibility to identify those who are qualified to serve as elders and deacons. It is the

elders' responsibility to appoint elders and deacons, overseeing the vision, direction and administration of the church. They also make sure the budget reflects the biblical vision and priorities of the church, as well as oversee the care and discipline of the members of the church.

It's the congregation's responsibility to affirm or to not affirm the elders' decisions. Without congregational affirmation, the elders would not move forward. I'm going to flesh that out a little bit more in the next point, but for now, I simply want it to be clear that in our system of church government, the oversight, administration, shepherding and doctrinal teaching of the church is ultimately the elders' responsibility, but that doesn't mean the elders are the ones who do all the ministry.

Let's look at Ephesians 4:11-12. This passage is saying that when Christ descended to the right hand of the Father and received all authority and power to reign, He blessed His church by giving gifts. *"He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers..."*—that's the description of the elders. And why did He give them? *"...[T]o equip the saints for the work of ministry..."* Who does the work of ministry? Not just the elders, but all the saints, *"...for building up the body of Christ."*

So the elders are just a few men who are called to lovingly shepherd the whole church, to teach the many in our congregation. Then the many in our congregation are being shepherded and taught so that you will be equipped, each of you, to go out and lovingly shepherd and teach a few people yourself—in your home, in your neighborhood, in your community. That's how the ministry of Christ through His church multiplies—as we're being equipped to do the work of ministry.

We've seen what God's Word teaches about His good design for leadership, now I want to do in the time that remains is apply this teaching in two different directions.

Application #1: How should God's people respond to God's good design for the leadership of His church?

First, I want to apply this to all of us—how we should respond to God's design for leadership in His church. Let's read Hebrews 13:17: *"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."*

Friends, your elders are keeping watch over your souls like watchmen at the walls of a city. They're not up there to be looked at and admired. They're not up there to get a suntan. They're up there to guard, protecting from harm and danger. They're watching night and day. Know that they will be called to give an account for you, for every sermon they've preached to you, for every lesson

they've given, for every phone call, every visit, every rebuke, every counsel, every casual conversation.

We don't do any of that outside the watchful gaze of our Chief Shepherd. One day we're going to stand before Him and He's going to ask us to give an account. He's going to review our faithfulness to His commission. That's sobering. I can assure you that the elders of your church take that very seriously. They must give an account. God says, through the writer of Hebrews, let them do this with joy, not with groaning. So it's possible to make your elders groan—and you don't want to do that, he's saying.

Now, if you and I are not thinking rightly about this text, we could be tempted in one of two ways. You could be tempted to think, "Who does he think he is—God's gift to the church? I mean, here he is, a leader, telling us to obey and submit to him." And second, I could be thinking right now that what I really need to say is not Hebrews 13:17, but what I really need to say to you is, "Don't follow your elders—we're just men. We have flaws. We make mistakes. We can sin. So don't follow us—follow Jesus." But friends, if we fall into either of those temptations, it would be because we're not trusting what God's Word is saying to us right now.

I heard Mike Bullmore preaching on this text and he said something like this: "I can read this text and I can teach this text without any hesitation or awkwardness, because I know—and I know that you know—that this word is part of God's goodness to His church."

We see this at the end of the verse, don't we, where it says, "*...of no advantage to you.*" There's an advantage God intends. There's a goodness God has designed for your life, but we're going to miss out on that advantage and goodness if we are resisting God's good design for leadership in His church. So the way each of us should respond is to receive our elders' oversight with joy. We should receive their instruction, care, leadership and shepherding. Imperfect though it is and imperfect it always will be, receive your elders' leadership as a good gift from God to you.

You should not be in a church where you cannot trust the leaders. The word here commands us to obey our leaders and submit to them. That's calling for a certain attitude. Someone put it like this: "A bent toward trusting, a disposition to support, a wanting to imitate and an inclination to comply." That's the attitude we should have toward our leaders.

I saw this beautifully exemplified in one of our members last December. We had just sent out our annual report which was about 15 pages long. He read it all—which is an act of love to begin with. It talked about our budget and upcoming January 5th State of the Church meeting. A dear brother in our church, a man many years my senior, read that report, then he arranged to meet with me. He expressed his love for the church and his love for the elders. But he had a

question, a concern, about a decision the elders had made—a decision that was reflected in our budget.

Here's what he said to me: "I don't want to come to the meeting on January 5th and just vote no. I want to support the elders. I'm grateful for our church. I want to be wholeheartedly affirming of our elders. So can you please help me understand this better?" It was an edifying conversation. We talked and prayed, then when it was all done, this brother's concern was satisfied. But even if he still would have disagreed with our decision after our meeting and even if he would have registered his dissent by not affirming the budget, I was helped by our meeting together. We both grew in our love for one another and for Christ's church as the result of our conversation and prayer. When he left that meeting, I thought, "There's a mature man of God. That's the kind of attitude we all should want to have. There's a true churchman."

Friends, it's not wrong to question a decision the elders make. Please do. We welcome dissent. We need it. It's good to receive your questions. It is not to your advantage to be suspicious and distrusting toward your elders. That kind of attitude toward authority is rampant in our culture, but it shouldn't be in the church. It doesn't bring joy to the elders when there is suspicion, distrust and disagreement but no conversation.

We don't expect you to always understand or agree with our decisions. We're not always right. We will make mistakes. But remember, friends, we are a family, not a democracy. And in a family, brothers and sisters talk with one another. The best way for members to thrive in an elder-led church is to come and talk to your elders if you're concerned about a decision or need clarity on something, because that's how a relationship grows. And that's how you can help us, if we're missing something or if we're starting to make mistakes.

Be encouraged that God has set in place protections, so that the authority of elders does not become abusive. We've already talked about the plurality of elders which means one of the protections is that if an elder is failing to meet the biblical qualifications, he has a moral responsibility to confess that to his fellow elders. We have a moral responsibility to watch over one another.

Another protection God has put in place is the accountability of 1 Timothy 5:17-20. I'd like you to turn there for just a minute. You might not even realize this is in the Bible, but it's important that you see how careful God is about protecting His flock from abusive leadership. "*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.'*" That's a favorable comparison: pastor to ox. "*And 'The laborer deserves his wages.' Do not admit a charge...*"

Here it is. The elders are appointed by God, so slanderous accusations are not permitted. *“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”* He’s referring to Moses’ law here. Then look at verse 20. This makes every sincere elder tremble. *“As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”* God knows we’re going to be tempted to sidestep that. We’re going to be tempted to show special treatment to some—and He knows that would be egregious. Look at what he says in verse 21: *“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.”*

So, is God’s Word realistic about the failings of elders? Absolutely. But despite these very appropriate, wise and necessary safeguards, God’s Word is also very clear that elders are a means of blessing and goodness to Christ’s church. When elders are leading God’s people out of a heart of Christlike love and with humility, and when God’s people are responding to the leadership of their elders lovingly, with a bent toward trusting, a disposition to support, a wanting to imitate and an inclination to comply, then God creates a very beautiful and compelling community which is unlike any society you can find on planet Earth. May that be so here at New Covenant.

Application #2: How should pastors and elders respond to God’s good design in leading His church?

The second application is directly to our pastors and elders. I want to speak to our pastors and elders about how we should respond to God’s good design for leadership in His church. Speaking particularly now to those men who are going to wake up tomorrow morning, after tonight’s membership meeting and find yourself an elder in Christ’s church. I’m talking to Tim Axford, Frank Chihowski, Patrick Havens, Tim Holloway, Mike Jacoby, Joe Kulesza, Dan Leeper, Brandon Stern and David Woolen. And I’m talking to myself.

Brothers, as go the leaders, so goes the church. I urge you to remember the words of the apostle Paul when he said farewell to the elders at the Ephesian church. Look at these words in Acts 20:28: *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”* Brothers, all three Persons of the Trinity are invested in how we lead this church. This is God’s church, obtained with His own Son’s blood. He called it the blood of God. Jesus is God.

And you, brothers, were personally selected. You were called by the Holy Spirit and appointed by the Holy Spirit to be overseers in this church. So protect the flock of God that is under your care. Protect her from false teaching, as you would from savage wolves. Contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. Hold firm to the trustworthy Word and don’t

be afraid to rebuke those who contradict it. Don't shrink back from giving God's people the whole counsel of God, because all of it is profitable. Every word of God is able to convict, reprove, correct, train in righteousness, comfort, heal and empower.

Brothers, in all you do, pay careful attention to yourselves. Watch over one another, lest there be in any of us an evil and unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. And guard your own heart. You can only give to others what you've first received from Christ. We can't do anything on our own. No one is going to be changed through the force of our personality or the skillfulness of our plans or our hard work. It's 100% by grace, performed by the Spirit, through the Word and sacraments. If you would feed the sheep, you must first be fed. You can only give out the gifts Christ has given you.

I leave the elders with the charge and exhortation of a fellow elder who died before he reached his 30th birthday. These are the words of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, whose love for Jesus was undying:

Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief. Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in His beams. Feel His all-seeing eye settled upon you in love and repose in His almighty arms... Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in Him.

Let's take a minute to bow before the Lord quietly. What has God spoken to you this month about loving His church? Where is He calling you to repent? How is He calling you to rejoice? What step are you being called to take to move toward a greater love of Christ's church? Talk with the Lord about that for a moment, as He searches us and is present among us, working in us both to will and to do His good pleasure. Ask Him for grace and help.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word to us. In every part, it is good. Every detail of Your design for Your church is good and we thank You that You have advantages for us through our obedience to Your good design. God, I thank You for this church and for the beautiful work You're doing here. We're almost ten years old and I thank You that You have protected this church from much harm and from division. There's a beautiful unity and we seek to preserve that unity of Your Spirit, because it is from Him in the bond of peace.

Lord, I pray that You would find the fissures underneath the surface that would threaten to disrupt the life of this church and that You would heal anything that would potentially cause division. Protect us from the snares of the devil, who would love nothing more than to wreak havoc

in our lives by breeding distrust, a lack of love, or just passiveness and lack of engagement. Holy Spirit, we thank You for the unity You've given. We pray that You would bind us together in perfect love and that You would mobilize us, with the full armor of God in place, to be an army bold whose battle cry is love, reaching out to those in darkness. By Your grace and with Your help, may we rise now and go into the world as Your people for Your glory. Amen.

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