

The Ideal Congregation

In the Light of Holy Scripture

A Bible Study Course for Adults

by

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Lesson 1 The Church Is God's Garden

Introduction

What is the church? The church is the gathering of all believers in Christ around the means of grace—the gospel in Word and sacrament. It is made up of people who have been made holy through the blood of Christ and have become his followers.

Although the entire fellowship of believers (the communion of saints) can be seen only by God, Christians make themselves visible to those around them. They publicly confess their faith through creeds; they join together in assemblies, also called churches. These visible gatherings of Christians take the form of congregations and may organize into larger groups called synods or denominations.

The Bible uses a variety of word pictures to describe the holy Christian church. One of these pictures is a garden, planted and watered by God himself. On the wasteland of man's sin and spiritual drought, God created a garden. He guards, protects, and waters it so that it grows and produces fruit.

God created his garden out of a wasteland.

- List some differences between a garden and a wasteland.

Genesis 3:15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

- When did God begin to grow his garden, the church?

Key Passage: Read Isaiah 55:10-13.

- How does God grow his garden?

Isaiah 43:19-21 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

- These verses speak about God’s deliverance of Judah from captivity in Babylon. They picture God’s grace to Israel and also to each member of his church in the New Testament. Describe the differences between a person who rejects God’s grace and one whose heart the Lord has opened to receive his grace.

God guards and protects his garden.

Psalms 125:1,2 Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.

John 8:31,32 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

- How does the Lord free his disciples from fear of the forces of evil?

Key Passage: Read Matthew 16:16-19.

- What does Jesus mean by “the gates of Hades”?
- What is the “rock” on which Christ’s church stands firm against its enemies?
- Does God’s protection extend over every visible church?

God continues to water his garden so it grows and produces fruit.

Matthew 28:16-20 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Acts 2:38-41 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

- How reasonable is it to expect that God will continue to water the church so that it grows and produces fruit? (This refers to me, my congregation, the synod, home and world missions.)

Key Passages: Read Psalm 1:1-3 and John 15:5-8.

- How important is it for us to depend on the Lord to grant what he has led us to expect?

Summary

Through the gospel message, the Lord has created a rich and beautiful garden, his church. He has promised to protect it and continues to water it and make it grow. The church rests in his promises and prays that he will continue to draw it closer to the ideal he has outlined in his Word.

Lesson 2 The Ideal Congregation Is Governed Exclusively by the Word of God

Introduction

There is a resurgence in the number of people looking for and joining congregations. Church buildings are springing up across the landscape like mushrooms on a rain forest floor. The soul longing for unity with others does not want to belong to just any congregation, but to an ideal congregation. What does that mean?

For some people, the ideal congregation is one that gives them what they demand from a church. These searchers determine their own ideal and seek out the congregation willing to do whatever is necessary to accommodate their expectations.

For others, the ideal congregation is one that does not ask a lot of judgmental questions about personal beliefs and ways of life. Here rigid doctrines do not interfere with “love.” This ideal congregation is attractive to those searching only for a support group. They may not have extended family or good friends living close by. They look at a congregation not for what it teaches, but for what recreational and emotional growth opportunities that congregation offers.

God’s ideal congregation, however, is not the one that accommodates or supports what I feel I must have to be happy or what I think would make this life perfect. The ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture defines well-being in a different way. Its concern is for the soul’s most momentous experience, eternity.

Accordingly, the ideal congregation is governed exclusively by the Word of God, not by human expectations. God’s purpose for giving us the Holy Scriptures, law and gospel, is to reveal himself, his wisdom, his will, and his plan of salvation. Through the power of that Word we repent of our sins, believe in Jesus as our Savior, live godly lives to his glory, and finally are saved.

The ideal congregation accepts the condemnation of the law and treasures the peace of the gospel.

- Compare law and gospel using these verses:

Key Passage: Read Exodus 20.

Romans 3:19,20 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

Romans 1:16,17 *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*

Key Passage: Read John 3:16-21.

- List some differences between law and gospel.

Romans 13:11,12 *Do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.*

- Evaluate: The primary goal of law and gospel is a godly life and the benefits a godly life brings us on this earth.

The ideal congregation believes that God inspired every word of Scripture.

Key Passage: Read 2 Timothy 3:15-17.

- Make a list of everything this verse says about Scripture.
- Compare these two statements: The Bible *is* God’s Word. The Bible *contains* God’s Word.
- What is my responsibility to the preacher, teacher, or visible church that does not stand solidly on the doctrine of inspiration? toward those who do?

- What should be our attitude toward Bible translations and study Bibles?

Summary

The ideal congregation treasures Scripture, for it contains law and gospel and leads the congregation to Christ, its source of salvation. It treasures Bible study, relies on Scripture as God's inspired Word, and wisely uses sound resources to study God's Word.

Lesson 3 The Ideal Congregation Has a High Regard for the Holy Sacraments

Introduction

The two sacraments, Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, are sacred acts using visible elements. They are connected with God's Word and bestow the forgiveness of sins. They are gifts God has given to the Christian church. Our high regard for the sacraments stems from our knowledge of where they come from, what they are worth, and the blessings they bestow.

Our God has given his church the sacraments. They were instituted by his Son, Jesus. The Holy Spirit uses them to extend and strengthen the church. They are of tremendous value because they bestow the forgiveness of sins and, through that forgiveness, bring people into God's family and strengthen their faith.

The ideal congregation in the light of the Holy Scripture will administer these means of grace rightly and diligently.

Teaching and using the sacraments as Christ instituted them forms a line of demarcation between an ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture and a congregation the believer will avoid.

Baptism is a means of grace by which God makes a sinner his child and a member of his church.

Matthew 28:19,20 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Galatians 3:26,27 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

1 Peter 3:19-21 He [Jesus] went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Key Passage: Read Titus 3:5-7.

- Why should our congregation value the Sacrament of Baptism?
- Whom should a congregation baptize?
- How can a congregation increase its appreciation and use of Baptism? hinder its use?
- My sister and her husband want me to be their new baby's godparent. Should I accept?

The ideal congregation treasures the Lord's Supper because it is Christ's body and blood given to his church for the forgiveness of its sins.

Key Passage: Read Matthew 26:26-28.

1 Corinthians 10:16,17 *Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.*

1 Corinthians 11:27-29 *Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

- Why should Christians value the Lord's Supper?
- Who are "worthy" communicants?

- What is the “one loaf” aspect of receiving the Lord’s Supper in our congregation?

- List some customs, traditions, and practices associated with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in our congregation. Do they encourage more frequent use of the Lord’s Supper?

Summary

The ideal congregation treasures the Sacrament of Baptism, realizing it is God’s means of making young and old members of his body. The ideal congregation treasures the Lord’s Supper as a gift given to it by the Lord himself and comes to the Lord’s Supper often. In this Supper the Lord gives his church his body and blood and the forgiveness of sins. Congregational members examine themselves so they come to the Lord’s table in a worthy way. When they come to the Lord’s table, they realize they are declaring fellowship and common faith with their fellow communicants.

Lesson 4 The Ideal Congregation Has a High Regard for the Public Ministry

Introduction

There is only one ministry, the ministry of God's reconciliation with the world through the gospel of Jesus Christ. God has given believers the right and privilege to call from among themselves agents to minister to them in a public way with the Word and sacraments. We call this the public ministry. We are most familiar with the public ministry taking the form of pastors and teachers. We are becoming more familiar with the concept and use of called staff ministers in our congregations.

In God's Holy Word we see the dignity, responsibility, and spirituality of the public ministry. Ministers are carrying on the work of the Lord. The Lord himself calls them to their appointed offices. The Lord gives them the power to accomplish his plans. Called servants of God look into God's Word for motivation and direction for faithful service in the public ministry. Public ministers labor to glorify God and spread abroad the true knowledge of Christ and his unchanging love for the world.

The relationship between the public ministry and the ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture is a close and spiritual one. The ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture acknowledges its called workers in the public ministry as servants of God sent by God. The congregation is to "respect those who work hard among [it] . . . [and] hold them in the highest regard in love" (1 Thessalonians 5:12,13).

The ideal congregation recognizes its pastor as God's ambassador for the sake of his gospel.

Key Passage: Read 2 Corinthians 5:17–6:2.

- What is the chief responsibility God has given the shepherds of his flock? What are some ways we can help our pastor fulfill this responsibility?

1 Corinthians 16:10 *If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am.*

1 Timothy 3:1-7 *Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled,*

respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Key Passage: Read Acts 20:25-32.

- Why is the work of the ministry lofty work? hard work?
- Agree or disagree? The most important quality of a good pastor is sound management skills.
- For what reasons may a congregation seek a change in its public ministers? For what reasons may public ministers seek a change in where they serve?

The ideal congregation is to know its pastor particularly as a servant of God.

1 Thessalonians 5:12,13 Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Key Passage: Read 1 Timothy 5:17-20.

- In what ways is it most important for a member to “know” the pastor?
- How is a pastor like the pilot of a ship? like a parent?

Summary

The ideal congregation believes that God calls men to serve as pastors of congregations. Pastors have the divine call to proclaim the message of salvation. The congregation's relationship with the pastor should reflect his calling as God's servant, and the congregation should respect him as such. Only when the pastor's conduct goes against Scripture should the congregation, through its leaders, seek to remedy the problem.

Lesson 5 The Ideal Congregation Is Faithful in Worship and Bible Study

Introduction

Of all the excellent qualities we see in David, one of the most prominent is his devout and sincere attachment to the house of the Lord. When his enemies drove him away from his place of worship, David's heart "thirsted" for the courts of the Lord, and he yearned to appear publicly before his God.

In Old Testament times, God dwelt in the tabernacle and later in the temple in Jerusalem. Today God dwells in a living temple, his church. Yet the ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture shares David's words and feelings. It desires to be where fellow members of the temple of God gather to worship. It knows that where two or three gather together in God's name, he is in their midst.

Our house of worship ought to be our favorite residence. We do not desire merely to see it or hear of it, but to worship and study God's Word in it. We always seek its good.

The ideal congregation shares David's attitude toward worship.

Psalm 26:1-8 Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have led a blameless life; I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth. I do not sit with deceitful men, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked.

I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, O LORD, proclaiming aloud your praise and telling of all your wonderful deeds. I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells.

Psalm 27:1-6 The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.

One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies

who surround me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD.

- What is the “beauty of the Lord” that David yearned for and that we see in our public worship?

- What attitudes and actions are befitting sinner-saints while in God’s house?

The ideal congregation does not forsake worshiping together.

***Luke 10:38-42** As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”*

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Key Passage: Read Hebrews 10:21-25.

- What are the benefits of public worship?

- Discuss these statements:
 You can be a Christian and never worship God.

Going to church is a good work.

I can worship God by myself at home just as well as in church.

- What testimony does public worship give to those who walk or drive by our church while we worship?

Summary

Christians want to worship. They know the beauty of the Lord—his pardon and mercy. They want to be with fellow Christians to praise the Lord and grow to know him better. They use this opportunity to strengthen and encourage one another in the faith.

Lesson 6 The Ideal Congregation Is a Praying Congregation

Introduction

The use of prayer is part of genuine piety. This movement of the renewed heart, this breathing of the heaven-bound soul, this evidence of spiritual existence is the language of the children of God. The ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture is active and diligent in prayer.

Only Christians can offer true prayer and call God “Father.” When we pray, we pray always and only in Jesus’ name. To pray in Jesus’ name means we acknowledge that our right to pray and our expectation of an answer according to God’s will are based solely on our Savior. It is with faith in Jesus alone that we dare lift our hands to God in supplication for every spiritual and physical desire and need. It is only for Jesus’ sake that God hears and answers our prayers.

Christians can pray to God in the privacy of their own bedrooms, kitchens, or closets. Family members can pray together at the bedside, at mealtime, or whenever they hold their devotions. Believers lift their hearts and voices together in corporate prayer as part of public worship. We pray at those times for ourselves, our families and friends, our neighbors, the ungodly, and our enemies.

Prayer is pouring out our hearts to God in word or thought.

*Hosea 14:2 Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him:
“Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit
of our lips.”*

- What should a Christian always pray for first?

Key Passage: Read Matthew 6:5-13.

- Read the Lord’s Prayer. Notice the predominance of spiritual themes. What lesson is here for the ideal congregation?
- What does Jesus warn us against in verses 5-7?
- What are “babbling” prayers?

God has promised that all prayers offered in Jesus' name will be answered.***Key Passage: Read Psalm 143:1,2.***

- David approaches his Lord in prayer. Then he acknowledges his sin and asks God not to condemn him. What lesson does David teach us about a Christian's attitude as he or she prays?

John 16:23 *In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*

- What does it mean to pray "in Jesus' name"?

- Why is a non-Christian prayer not heard even if the person praying is sincere?

Matthew 7:7-11 *Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

- What encouragement does Jesus give us in these verses?

- True or false? God answers every single prayer the believer prays.

- List some different types of prayers. What parts do prayers generally include?
- Should we pray in our own words or use prayers prepared by someone else?

Summary

The ideal congregation has a high regard for prayer. It recognizes prayer as a gift of God, a way of communicating with God. It prays in Jesus' name, humbly confessing its sins and knowing that in Christ it has access to the Father. The ideal congregation prays with confidence, trusting in God's love and power to help.

Lesson 7 The Ideal Congregation Contributes Generously to God's Work

Introduction

Someone once said, "Christian giving is an essential part of Christian living." What we receive from God, we are to share with others. And there is no better use for our possessions than the strengthening and expansion of Christ's kingdom. Through the gospel we are members of Christ's kingdom, and we are pledged to support its cause. Mission work, worker training, special ministries, and the spiritual and physical needs of our congregation all offer ample opportunity for us to use our financial resources as we grow in the grace of giving.

Money can be the most cruel tyrant or the most useful servant. If it comes to a people without spiritual motives or power, money can tie their stomach into knots, keep them exhausted during the day and awake at night, and turn their warm hands into cold, muscle-bound fists.

However, if money in a person's hand goes along with faith in a person's heart, it is used according to God's will.

We know God is the giver of everything we have. Without God's mercy, we beggars would receive nothing. We are like baby birds with our mouths constantly open, waiting to be filled. We have nothing to call our own but are managers of our master's property and wealth. The ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture appreciates his gifts, and is grateful for them. It freely express that gratitude not only in words but also in deeds.

The Savior is profoundly interested that we use his money so the gospel can be spread.

Key Passage: Read Luke 16:1-13.

- What is the point of this parable? How can we apply this parable to our lives?

The ideal congregation has a spiritually healthy view of money.

1 Corinthians 16:2 On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

Matthew 6:19-24 *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Job 1:20,21 *At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.”*

Matthew 19:16-29 *Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”*

“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”

“Which ones?” the man inquired.

Jesus replied, “ ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

“All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Peter answered him, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

1 Timothy 6:10 *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*

- What do the above passages teach us about a God-pleasing view of money and wealth?

Additional Discussion:

- In what specific areas does God want us to use the money he has given us? Is there a special order of importance for those areas?

Summary

The ideal congregation gives generously to the Lord. It recognizes that all it has is a trust from God, to be used according to God’s priorities and will. It gives because the Lord has given it the hope of eternal life. It gives so that God’s kingdom expands and fellow Christians are nurtured in the faith.

Lesson 8 The Ideal Congregation Is Active in Mission Work

Introduction

Bringing souls to saving faith by the gospel of Jesus Christ is the highest achievement possible for Christians.

The early church shined the light of the gospel from one end of the empire to the other. Men, women, and children who knew and loved Christ went out and told others the good news of the Savior.

Jesus' Great Commission is "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The living God issues this charge and promises to be with us. Neither men nor devils can stop us when the Son says, "Go forth."

We also know the why of mission work. We look around and see countless thousands who still need Christ and the blessings he earned for them on the cross. Mission work knows no boundaries of race, geography, or economic status. It spares no expense in prayers and offerings. All believers form one great missionary band that labors zealously with the Spirit's blessing to bring more souls to Christ.

The ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture recognizes mission work as its God-given duty and its most exalted privilege.

Mission work is at the heart of Christian life.

Key Passage: Read Acts 1:1-11.

- Consider the following questions on the section of Scripture we just read. Think about applications to our life as missionaries.

How did Jesus equip the disciples to spread his Word?

How would God's kingdom be spread throughout the world?

Matthew 28:16-20 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

- According to the Great Commission, what should Christians do?
- How should they accomplish this?
- What promises does Jesus attach to his command?
- What does the world consider to be a great accomplishment? Contrast that with what the Lord considers to be a great accomplishment.
- What should the ideal congregation be doing in the area of mission work?
- Agree or disagree? I must verbally tell others about my Savior if I am to feel I am taking part in the Great Commission.

Summary

The ideal congregation is one that has a heart for spreading God’s Word. It chooses a way that is appropriate for its setting and gifts and eagerly takes part in God’s Great Commission. It draws comfort from Jesus’ promises and courage from the Holy Spirit to take part in work that accomplishes more than anything else it might do.

Lesson 9 The Ideal Congregation Provides for the Education and Training of Its Children

Introduction

Public education needs to be of the finest quality for the benefit of society in this world. Christian education concerns itself with the eternal destiny of immortal souls.

God's will is that parents bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This is Christian education. It is education that lasts not only for the child's life here and now, but also for the child's eternal life.

The duty of giving children a Christian education belongs primarily to parents. Parents are to treat their children as sons and daughters of the kingdom and provide them not only with food, clothing, and shelter, but with instruction in God's Word. They are to lead them to their Savior and give them guidance for God-fearing lives. Children will call their parents "blessed" as they learn to appreciate such parental attention.

The local congregation can help Christian parents carry out their duty. Depending on location, size, and available resources, it can provide Sunday schools, confirmation classes, elementary schools, and other arenas for Christian education.

All members of the ideal congregation, even those who have no children or whose children have grown, will pray for parents, teachers, pastors, and the children they are training. Congregations will not look on the financial support of Christian education as a waste of money, but as a use of money that will reap eternal dividends.

Christian education is the parents' responsibility.

Key Passage: Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

- How can parents today write God's Word on their doorposts, tie it to their hands and feet, and talk about it along the road?

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

- What is the main duty of the Christian father? Why does Paul mention only the father?

Proverbs 22:6 *Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.*

- Agree or disagree? If a child turns away from the Lord as an adult, it is the parents' fault.

The congregation is to help parents fulfill their responsibility.

- How is our congregation helping parents instruct their children in God's Word? What more could we do?
- What harmful tensions may arise between part-time and full-time Christian education agencies in the congregation?
- How might a proper emphasis on Christian education help recruit young men and women for the public ministry?

Summary

The Lord has given parents the great responsibility of bringing up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The ideal congregation looks for ways to help parents fulfill this responsibility.

Lesson 10 The Ideal Congregation Practices Church Discipline

Introduction

Church discipline is the loving action of the congregation toward those who have fallen into flagrant and open rebellion against God's expressed will and are not displaying a spirit of contrition and repentance. Under consideration are not the day-to-day faults and failings of which all Christians are guilty due to the weakness of their sinful natures. These too are serious and need to be handled with the Word of God, patience, and love, but what the congregation must deal with is an attitude of unrepentance that is putting the person's soul in eternal jeopardy.

The ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scriptures lovingly and consistently applies God's Word to such people in order to call them to repentance. The congregation keeps necessary confidences and does not use church discipline as a tool to trim "dead wood" from its membership list. Church discipline is about calling the wandering soul back to the Savior and his kingdom.

Church discipline is comprised of teaching, admonishing, and exhorting with God's Word. The ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture uses the Word of God to expose and condemn sin, forgive sinners when they humbly acknowledge their transgressions, and encourage repentant souls to live according to their heavenly Father's revealed will.

The ideal congregation follows God's Word in carrying out church discipline.

John 20:22,23 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

- What right and responsibility has God given his church?

Matthew 18:15-18 If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he

refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

- What directions does Jesus give his church for carrying out church discipline?

- What is the purpose of church discipline?

Key Passages: Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-12 and 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

- What insights does this real-life situation give us on the matter of excommunication?

Luke 15:32 We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

- What should be the congregation's attitude when a sinner repents?

Church discipline is a matter of love.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

- Apply Paul's words to the matter of church discipline.

Ephesians 4:15,16 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

- People often talk about preventive maintenance. What should the Christian congregation do in love to prevent losing souls from Christ's church?

- Agree or disagree? There is no such thing as self-excommunication.

- Does putting an impenitent sinner out of the holy Christian church include shunning him or her in daily secular activity? What if the person attends worship?

Summary

The ideal Christian congregation takes church discipline seriously. It treats the sinner with patience and love, and if it becomes clear that he or she is impenitent, it declares that person to be no longer a member of Christ's church or that congregation. It prays that God would lead that person to repentance, and if repentance comes, it receives that person back into its fellowship, with assurances that God has forgiven his or her sin.

Lesson 11 The Ideal Congregation Takes a Stand against the World and Lets Its Light Shine for All to See

Introduction

God's mission for his church is not to create a heaven on earth. Believers will never be able to establish in this world one visible kingdom of God in which everyone believes in the true God, confesses Jesus Christ as Savior, and perfectly does God's will. Our mission is to make disciples of Christ through the gospel and manifest our Christian faith as we live in this sinful world. Jesus says we are salt and light and a city set on a hill.

God's Word declares we are in the world, but we are not part of the world. We cannot love this world and its "stuff" and love God at the same time. It may be an exaggeration to sing "life is a desert dream" since God richly and daily supplies us with his bounty in a world that contains much of the beauty of the original creation, but it is no exaggeration to sing "heaven is my home." As the ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture travels its earthly pilgrimage to heaven, it takes a definite stand against the world—that is, against its philosophies, affections, and activities, which oppose God and contradict his revealed will.

We take our stand together. Our synod and congregation find appropriate avenues to speak out against a particular sin in society, always keeping in mind that our primary mission is the eternal salvation of lost souls. The ideal congregation in the light of Holy Scripture is not just another religious organization to fight society's ills. At the same time, we are not blind or apathetic toward sin and its consequences.

Most of the time, the Christian takes his or her stand alone against the world. It is the individual who goes to work, enjoys recreational activities, shops, goes to school, etc.

How do we take our stand? We love prayer more than pleasure. We read the Bible. We exclude ourselves from situations and places that may tempt us. Others are able to notice God's love on display in what we say and do.

God sums up the way we take our stand against the world: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The church is in the world but not of it.

Leviticus 20:26 You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.

- In the Old Testament, God set his people apart from the rest of the world. What lesson is there for the New Testament church?

Key Passage: Read 1 John 2:15-17.

James 4:4 *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*

John 15:19 *If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.*

- Give examples from these passages of the strong language God uses to distinguish his church from the world.

Matthew 5:14-16 *You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

- What are the positive results of the church remaining separate from the world?

The church dare not bring the world into itself.**Key Passage: Read 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1.**

2 Corinthians 4:1,2 *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.*

- List some examples of bringing the world into the church.

- Give some examples of how Jesus came into contact with the world and did not exclude himself from it yet never allowed the world to change his witness or course of action.

Summary

The ideal congregation wants to remain the salt and light of the world. For that reason it keeps itself separate from the world and does not make the methods and ways of the world its own.

May the Lord bless you through the gospel and bring you and your congregation closer to God's ideal!