

The Wednesday night Bible study group went through a workbook called Experiencing God. Some of us had done it years before. There are always things one might disagree with, but overall, it is a challenging study that will bring you to a deeper walk with the Lord. One of the lessons that really spoke to me this time was on the church. Over my twenty years of ministering in Sedona, I have always found it difficult to help congregations see their need to recognize how interdependent we should be. American individualism is also somewhat detrimental to the idea of the church as a unit. The high rate of turnover in this city and having part of our congregation here seasonally adds to the difficulty of seeing ourselves as one body. As I read the lesson, I saw that I had, without realizing it, just given up on seeing it come to pass. That isn't acceptable.

Because the instruction of Scripture is difficult doesn't mean we can forget it. That is why I want to focus this New Year message on God's call to us as a group of believers.

When Peter voiced his belief that Jesus was the Son of God, Jesus told Peter heaven had revealed that truth to him. On that truth, Jesus said, "I will build my church." (Matthew 16:16-18) The word "church" means "called out ones." We are called out to serve the Lord together as one united organism. Each of us has a unique calling and function that serves the whole. Henry Blackaby wrote, "Perhaps of the greatest challenges for Christianity in our day is for churches to walk with God so closely that the world comes to know Him through their witness. When a church allows God's presence and activity to be expressed through them, a watching world will be drawn to Him." (John 12:32) How can we be that kind of a congregation?

First we have to realize who we are in relationship to God and to one another. I'll go over a few points that Blackaby drew from Scripture that explain God's plan for a body of believers. As Jesus said, He builds the church. Not one of us is here by mistake. He drew you here because the gifts and calling on your life fit into the plan He has for us. The Apostle wrote, ⁷ *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* 1Corinthians 12:7 If you are a guest with us this morning, that applies to you at your local church as well.

God has given you elders to teach, preach, and lead you through their prayer together seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit. Paul told Titus to appoint elders in every church to oversee the congregations (Titus 1:5). It is not one man's job, but rather a group of brothers in Christ who are willing and called to serve. Seeking the Lord together, they come to a united decision of how the Lord is leading and share it with the congregation. They are not to act as dictators, but as servants of the Lord and those who attend.

Commented [PW1]: Matthew 16:16-18 (ESV)

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Commented [PW2]: John 12:32 (ESV)

³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

Commented [PW3]: Titus 1:5 (ESV)

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—

(1Peter 5:1-5). Part of their job is to help equip you to serve in whatever capacity God has called you (Ephesians 4:11-16).

It really doesn't matter if we have a building or not. Some churches meet under a tree. Some meet in homes. A church is a group of people who have placed their faith in Christ and see Him as the head of their gathering (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15-16). It is a group of people submitting to Christ together, seeking His will together. We are uniquely related to one another. Many of us find our spiritual family to be closer than our physical family. We share the same heart for the Lord and desire to do His will. We need one another to accomplish His call on our lives. **Our mission is to allow the life of Christ to be manifest in us to carry out the Father's redemptive purposes in the world (Matthew 28:18-20; 2Corinthians 5:17-20).** "We are God's fellow workers" (1Corinthians 3:9).

I'd like to cast the vision for this by sharing what I have witnessed here and at other churches. The ministry in Senegal has a base that was sponsored by a church in Texas. The Lord gave them a burden for the Muslim world. They searched for a town with a favorable imam in which there was not a single witness for Christ. They rented a house there and dug a well. The members of the church take turns manning the station. The well is available to the community. Muslims who are interested attend a Bible Study. Sometimes medical clinics are held. Short term mission teams come and do skits with a message, or help with needs in the town. They distribute materials. People in the town come to the house for prayer when they are sick because they know Jesus is the One who heals. It has become a base for training locals for ministry. What a unique and interesting vision God gave that church.

Before I came to Wayside I had a vision for the potential of this church. The traffic that flows by comes from all over the world. My wife has had the opportunity to lead a number of Japanese to the Lord, simply because she works on the flower beds and helps clean the walkways. One of the first things I did here was to put the clear boxes at the entry and down on the street with the weekly sermon and Gospels of John in English, then we added Japanese, and sometimes we include Spanish.

The painting in our foyer was another opportunity to invite people in and share the wonder of the resurrection. And now, with the Gateway Project coming, the opportunities for us to be a light to the world right from our church building are multiplying. The elders are praying and watching for God to direct us as to how the Lord would have us respond to this opportunity He is placing before us. You've approved the remodel of the entry to make it more inviting. An evangelist has recently purchased a house here and will spend an increasing amount of time here. He wants to use the patio as a welcome center.

Commented [PW4]: 1 Peter 5:1-5 (ESV)

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:

² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;

³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

⁵ 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."

Commented [PW5]: Ephesians 4:11-16 (ESV)

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets,

¹² the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,

¹³ to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

¹⁴ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

¹⁵ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

¹⁶ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

¹⁷ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Commented [PW6]: Ephesians 1:22 (ESV)

²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,

Commented [PW7]: Ephesians 4:15-16 (ESV)

¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Commented [PW8]: 1 Corinthians 3:9 (ESV)

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

So what is your part? One brother has volunteered to cook for men's breakfast. Another leads the men's group. Some participate in the worship and tech team. Others serve as deaconesses. Every part makes up the whole. God not only wants us to share salvation, but also disciple people (Matthew 28:19-20). We watch for how God is leading and the opportunities He is giving us, and then we pray about how He wants us to be involved.

This is not about coming up with good ideas, but rather discerning God's plan. He is already at work. He is the One who moved the city to make its entry way by our front door. He is the One who had this building placed in this location (Acts 17:26-27). He brought us all here because of our God given gifts and the calling on our lives. If we want a world in darkness to see the light of Jesus, we just need to join God in what He is already doing. Human effort and good ideas of man will never produce lasting fruit (John 15:5). It is the work of God that remains.

We must always keep in mind that our doing comes out of our being. Discerning God's will and the effectiveness of our labor comes out of our relationship with God. God is more interested in our heart becoming His home than He is in what we can do for Him (John 14:23). When we put service before our personal relationship with God our service is likely to be misguided and unfruitful (1Corinthians 3:11-15). Service that comes from our loving union with the Holy Spirit is far more important than just doing something from religious duty. In the theme of last week's message, He wants a bride that loves Him above all else. Her service is cooperation that comes out of love and respect.

There are three things the Lord desires of His bride. God wants His people to be holy and pure. ¹⁴ *As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance,* ¹⁵ *but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,* ¹⁶ *since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."* 1 Peter 1:14-16 ¹⁴ *Do all things without grumbling or disputing,* ¹⁵ *that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,* Philippians 2:14-15

God want His people to display unity. ²⁰ *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,* ²¹ *that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* ²³ *I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.* John 17:20-21, 23 ³ *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* Ephesians 4:3

Commented [PW9]: Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV)

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Commented [PW10]: Acts 17:26-27 (ESV)

²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,

Commented [PW11]: John 15:5 (ESV)

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Commented [PW12]: John 14:23 (ESV)

²³ Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

Commented [PW13]: 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 (ESV)

¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

God wants His people to love one another. ¹¹ *For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.* ¹⁸ *Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.* ²³ *And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.* 1 John 3:11, 18, 23 If we are to be the church God would have us to be then we must be pure and holy, be in unity, and have love for one another. Then we will be available for Him to work through us (2 Chronicles 16:9).

When God reveals what He is doing and invites us to join Him it often results in a crisis of faith (Judges 6:14-15). That is because it is usually out of our comfort zone. He often will do things that we know are way beyond our capacity so that He alone gets the glory, and so that we come to experience the wonder of His wisdom and might. It will stretch our faith and require us to take action. That action will be exciting but uncomfortable. We are so used to trusting our own abilities, but you will never grow in faith if you stay there. You will never experience what God can do without stretching your faith. Imagine how that church in Texas felt when they caught the vision to plant a work in an unreached Muslim city.

When God directs it often requires some major adjustments. We all like business as usual because we think we know what to expect. But throw yourself on God and His ability and we think we are on uncertain ground. The opposite is really true. You could not be more secure than in the center of God's will (Psalm 16:8). We have had a few of those times, but I believe we are about to face some that are even more exciting.

Please hear this for yourself as well. While I am addressing the church, these principles are true in our individual lives too. Often the two will overlap. As an individual in the body you will personally be challenged to step out on faith and do what God is calling you to do, and that fits in with what God is doing with the whole church. Let me give a "for instance." One of our jeep drivers has the opportunity to invite a customer to church. The greeter makes them feel welcome. Others introduce themselves and make the person feel comfortable. The worship team leads us from the heart into God's presence. The Call to Worship is just what the person needed to hear from the Lord. The message presents the Gospel. After the service, someone invites them to lunch, and you can imagine the rest (1 Corinthians 3:7). That's the body working together.

The evangelist that is moving here asked if we would disciple those he leads to Christ. I asked if that was a trick question. I love to do that. A number of you would love to do that. We've seen some incredible life transformations through discipleship. And it doesn't even matter if they end up attending here. What matters is doing God's will faithfully. *In Christ, we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others.* Romans 12:5 (NIV) Do you? Is that what you believe and how you act?

Commented [PW14]: 2 Chronicles 16:9 (ESV)

⁹ For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him. You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars."

Commented [PW15]: Judges 6:14-15 (ESV)

¹⁴ And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?"

¹⁵ And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house."

Commented [PW16]: Psalm 16:8 (ESV)

⁸ I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

Commented [PW17]: 1 Corinthians 3:7 (ESV)

⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

Your elders will seek the heart of God and His direction. God can also speak to someone else in the congregation who will in turn share with the elders. Unity is often difficult to achieve and can take time. We don't have to do things on a schedule if we need more time to understand and discern God's direction. If we are in Christ and seeking His heart in prayer, willing to discuss all sides of issues, eventually, we will all see God's heart. We just can't be in a hurry to do that (Psalm 27:14). One of the great challenges to our elder meetings was to put aside our time constraints and take as long as we may need, that night or that year, to come to what we are convinced is God's direction. As a body of believers we must be willing to do the same. We all make plans, but we must put the priority on seeking God's will in unity.

The most important factor is not a method, or even the by-laws, but a relationship with a Person. Christ is the head of His church. He knows how to work in each of us uniquely to discover His will. Large churches of thousands may have to allow the staff and elders to make decisions without the whole body's involvement. But smaller churches like ours have the blessing of allowing everyone to participate in decisions. Then everyone owns what they believe to be God's will and all have a personal commitment to be a part of what God is doing.

I would love to see more testimonies of how God is working in your lives. What do you see God doing in your life and in the church? Is God leading you to start a small group or outreach? Maybe you've felt the nudge to pray in the prayer room for those in attendance but you want more training. Ask, and an elder or myself would be glad to share with you. Maybe you've been convicted to spend some time on Saturdays showing the painting to tourists but you don't feel qualified. You can practice on me. We need help in children's church, on the sound board and visuals, with building maintenance, and more. But remember, being is more important than doing. Commit to be all God has called you to be first. Take that time to be in His Word and prayer. Then let God lead you into the joy of service (Isaiah 56:7). And share what God is doing in your life. That encourages others to experience God for themselves. It's an adventure. You can't predict what exciting things God will have for you and the whole church body. We can't follow a method! We need instructions that are especially customized for our church from its Head, Christ Jesus. Ready for an adventure? Are you willing to act?

- 1 What are some issues that distract from the church being a united body?
- 2 What happens when we allow God's presence and activity to be expressed?
- 3 Why are you a part of your church?
- 4 What is the elders' God given role?
- 5 What is a church?

- 6 What is the church's mission?
- 7 What is a 1000 times better than a good idea?
- 8 What is more important than doing things for God?
- 9 What does God ask of us?
- 10 What is the church's first priority?

Commented [PW18]: Psalm 27:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Commented [PW19]: Isaiah 56:7 (ESV)

⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.⁷