

In Pursuit of Grace Commitments

A Commitment to the Local Church



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Perimeter church 9500 Medlock Bridge Road. Duluth, GA 30097. 678.405.2000

Unit 1



The Local Church, part 1

A Needed Authority for Kingdom People

TRUTH

by memory – Matthew 16:18b-19 (ESV)

"...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

in Bible –

The next 4 units of *The Journey* will challenge you to live out a grace commitment to the local church. The term *grace commitment* may be unfamiliar to you so you should know that it refers to a discipline or commitment that is *motivated by God's Grace*. The opposite of a grace commitment is what we have called *performance*. Performance is motivated by a desire to earn God's favor.

Jesus instituted His church to be a visible expression and demonstration of God's kingdom. Through the church, God's kingdom advances visibly as the gospel is brought to every people group around the globe, and invisibly as people grow in obedience to the Lord Jesus. During this series you'll learn how the kingdom and the church are connected, and discover the marks of the true church. You will examine the benefits and responsibilities that come with being in covenant relationship with a local church. And you will also see how the church functions so as to meet the differing needs of kingdom and non-kingdom people.

Before you begin, you may want to remind yourself of the **PRAISE** approach to personal worship by reviewing Unit 2 of the Gospel Living series. If you like, you can focus on the **in Bible** passages in this unit for your personal worship. As you study this week, try to integrate these verses into your personal worship using **PRAISE** and the **5 Targets of Prayer**.

Matthew 13:31-33 – Matthew 13 contains several “kingdom” parables Jesus taught to reveal the nature of the kingdom of God.

What do you think the parable of the mustard seed teaches about the kingdom of God?

What do you think the parable of the leaven teaches about the kingdom of God?

Matthew 16:13-19 – In this passage, Jesus connects the kingdom of God that had come during His ministry with the church that He would establish by His post-resurrection outpouring of the Spirit.

What do you think the symbols of keys, binding and loosing represents in verse 19? Explain.

To whom do you think Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom? Peter? The apostles? All Christians?

What do you think this passage teaches about the connection between the kingdom and the church?

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Matthew 18:15-18 – Jesus is speaking to His disciples here, giving them instruction in the matter of church discipline.

In your own words, summarize the process Jesus prescribed for dealing with someone within the church who has sinned against another member of the church.

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Jesus again uses the figure of binding and loosing in verse 18. Compare this with Matthew 16:19. What do you think Jesus means by binding and loosing in these passages?

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Acts 14:19-23 – These verses give us a glimpse into the earliest formation of several churches.

After preaching the gospel and winning disciples, what was Paul's next priority when establishing a new church? How would this benefit these young churches?

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Hebrews 13:17 – This verse admonishes the Hebrew believers to obey their spiritual leaders.

Why should the church obey its leaders? What responsibility does God lay upon church leaders?

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to summarize –

This investigation of the nature and purpose of the local church will begin with a brief introduction to the kingdom of God since these subjects are closely related, though not identical, in Jesus' teaching.

A prominent theme of Jesus' teaching was His oft repeated announcement of the good news that the *kingdom of God had come (see Matthew 4:17). What did Jesus mean by *kingdom*? When you think of the word *kingdom* you probably envision geographic boundaries and territories, subjects living within those territories, and a ruler, whose authority extends throughout those territories. Such were the kingdoms of England, France, Spain and others, whose kings and queens extended their realms throughout much of the world during the period of European colonialism. The kingdom of God, however, is unlike the common understanding of a kingdom in this respect: The kingdom of God has no geographic territory, though it has an absolute ruler and those who are subject to His authority. So, the kingdom of God, in biblical usage, emphasizes the abstract concept of God's reign over His people rather than the geographic extent of His authority. Said another way, the kingdom of God during this present age is about God's invisible reign, not His visible realm. This emphasis is illustrated by the kingdom parables recorded in Matthew 13. Rather than beginning with a large territory fit for a king, God's kingdom begins as a tiny mustard seed, whose dynamic growth brings shelter and blessing for all who would call it home. Likewise, the parable of the leaven shows that the influence of God's kingdom expands, not by conquering new territory, but by infiltrating its surroundings secretly and mysteriously.

Well then, why did Jesus announce the coming of God's kingdom as good news? We might tend to think of freedom from kingly authority, not subjection to a king, as good news. But the coming of the kingdom was good news because in it, we receive the freedom and blessing of living under the rule of a just and merciful King. The good news that Jesus taught did not include autonomous freedom for freedom's sake; He taught that ultimate freedom – the freedom to live in righteousness and salvation from the power and penalty of sin – comes only by submitting to the authority of the King who brings salvation. So then, the coming of the kingdom of God is good news because outside His kingdom, there is no salvation.

The question then arises, how does one identify and order the people of an invisible kingdom? The answer is by bringing them together in a visible organization with a shared confession, mission and value system – the church. Think of the church as the covenant community that visibly manifests the invisible kingdom. The church is Jesus' instrument for proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. It is the community through which one enters the kingdom, and through which one begins to experience the blessings of living under God's kingdom rule. Yet, it is not strictly identical to the kingdom, for

*The Gospel of Matthew often substitutes the phrase "kingdom of heaven" as a synonym for "kingdom of God".

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whereas the true people of the invisible kingdom are perfectly known by God, these people can only be imperfectly identified by the human leadership of the visible church. Nevertheless, the church is still Christ's building project and not merely a society of people.

In addition to this, the church has been invested with custodial authority over the kingdom. Jesus taught this when speaking to Peter and the rest of His disciples in Matthew 16. First, He said in verse 18 that He would build a hell-shattering church on the *foundational confession that He is the Christ. Then He went on to say in verse 19, *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* What, you may ask, are these *keys*, and who did Jesus give them to? Keys were an ancient symbol of authority. Property owners in the ancient near-east would entrust a chief servant with the keys to all their goods and property. This steward had authority and responsibility to lock (shut) and unlock (open) his master's stores of goods in service to him. For instance, Joseph would have been entrusted with the keys to Potiphar's property when he was Potiphar's chief steward (See Genesis 39:5-6). In Matthew's gospel, the metaphor of binding and loosing is used the way we would speak of shutting and opening. When a steward binds something, he is shutting a door; when he looses, he is opening a door. So, whoever is entrusted with the keys of the kingdom of heaven has authority to shut out and to let in.

So, to whom did Jesus give the keys of the kingdom? The traditional Protestant view is that Jesus entrusted the keys to all the Apostles – the leaders of the infant church – and those elders to whom they transferred authority by the laying on of hands (See Acts 14:23). The scope of their authority was and is to act on behalf of Christ administering the entry into, and the discipline of, the church. Those who hold the keys have authority and responsibility to open the door of the church to those who give biblical evidence of belonging to the kingdom, and shut the door upon those deemed outside of the kingdom. This doesn't mean that human church leaders can infallibly determine whether or not someone is a Christian. But it does mean they have authority to discern on biblical grounds whether or not someone should be *treated* as a Christian, that is, as belonging to the kingdom or not. As long as this authority is administered on biblical grounds, the local church becomes the visible, though imperfect, community of those who belong to God's invisible kingdom.

This raises the question of how the true church can be known. How can you know if your local church is a true church served by elders who administer biblical authority? The traditional Protestant answer

*The Roman Catholic church teaches that the foundation of the church is Peter himself, based on the erroneous identification of Peter (in Greek, *petros*) with the rock (in Greek, *petra*) in verse 18. The Protestant view is that Jesus founded His church on Peter's confession, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* (Matthew 16:16). The Apostle John seems to support this view when he taught how to identify those who belong to Christ's church: *"Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God"* (1 John 4:15).

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is that a true local church is marked by faithfulness to biblical worship through the Word and Sacraments, by participation in the gospel mission, and by the biblical discipline of its members.

Any community of people must employ a system of discipline to resolve disputes, and to determine who does and doesn't belong to the community. So it is with the church. Jesus taught in Matthew 18 that if a brother (e.g. another member of the church) has truly wronged you, you should first confront him or her privately. If this brother will not listen, you should then confront him or her with two or three witnesses. If the brother still will not repent, you should involve the church leadership. If after this, the brother is still unrepentant, then Jesus said, *"...let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"* (Matthew 18:17-18). This means that the church leadership is authorized by Christ to treat that person *as if* he or she were an unbeliever, remove their membership, and bar them from receiving the Sacraments. The former brother may or may not be a Christian, but since their non-repentance is a typical characteristic of an unbeliever, the church must treat them as such. Repentance is the signal of true saving faith in Jesus, and is required if re-admittance to the church is to be offered. Again, it must be said that human leaders cannot make infallible decisions, and yet Jesus authorizes them to administer discipline with authority in the church. This means that it is possible to have local church members who are not true members of God's kingdom; and occasionally, there may be those who have been excluded from local church membership who are truly members of God's kingdom.

But an unwise and dangerous new trend has arisen in the church that seems common now, but was unheard of until the 20th century: Many true Christians do not want to be members of a local church. This trend is caused by apathy toward the church that can be traced back to a lack of understanding of the connection that the kingdom and the church share. Some Christians are isolationists. Others unwisely devalue membership in the local church. To them, membership just doesn't matter. They don't consider it a significant part of their spiritual journey. Some may even consider receiving the Sacraments of little value. Still others, place themselves in spiritual jeopardy because they resist submission to the *keys* – the spiritual authority of a local church.

But, ask these same Christians how they would feel about their sons or daughters living with someone outside of marriage, and they would say, "No, there needs to be a promise. They need to make their covenant vows to one another so they can be identified as husband and wife." In the same way, there needs to be a practical mechanism for the local church to identify who is inside and outside the covenant community of believers. In the early church, which was born into either Jewish or pagan societies, this mechanism was the sacrament of Baptism, which marked one's exit from Jewish or pagan worship and entrance into the covenant community of believers. Participation in the Lord's Table marked one's continued membership in the covenant community. However, as societies

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changed and churches multiplied, there arose a need for those who have already been baptized to signal their willingness to share in a local church's mission, as well as to submit to its spiritual authority and discipline. Taking vows of membership in a local church is that mechanism. The local church is a covenant community and covenant vows identify the members of that community who share in its blessings and responsibilities.

Have you made a grace commitment to your local church by taking vows of membership? If you are not willing to make a formal commitment to your local covenant community of believers, ask yourself why. Is it that you don't value your local church? Are you unwilling to share in their mission or submit to their spiritual authority? Do you not trust your local church leadership? Whatever the reason, the connection between God's kingdom and the local church is a compelling reason for you to reconsider and find a community of believers with whom you would gladly share in mission and submit to spiritual authority. Remember that the local church is the visible manifestation of the good news that the kingdom has come. The local community of believers is the front door of the kingdom and Christ has given the keys to open and shut, bind and loose, to the biblically ordained leaders of your local church. It is through entering the local church, acknowledging the privileges and responsibilities of membership, that kingdom people experience the blessings of living under God's reign.

EQUIPPING

Remember to work on the equipping exercise, "Learning the Books of the New Testament" at the end of this material. By the end of this four week series you should be able to recite the books of the New Testament by memory in your group meeting.

Take a moment to describe the view of church membership you had before you studied this material.

Now describe how you think the Bible either supports or conflicts with that view.

When you think about "submitting to the spiritual authority of a local church", what goes through your mind? Do you have positive thoughts? Negative thoughts? Explain.

Are you a member of your local church? Why or why not? What benefits would you gain, and what responsibilities would you shoulder by this grace commitment?

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MISSION – PRAYING

During the Gospel Living series you explored the what, why, how and where of missional living:

What is it? – sharing in Jesus’ mission to make the gospel known to all people

Why participate in it? – the love of God displayed in the gospel compels and empowers

How is it manifest? – by sharing in word and demonstrating by deeds

Where does it impact the world? – across the street, track and ocean

Now let’s think about *who* missional living impacts. Who are the people that Christians make the gospel known to? They are those who are not believers, and those who may have other physical, economic or spiritual needs. Sometimes Christians refer to these as *the least and the lost*. You may find the least and the lost across the street where you live, work and play, or across the track in your community or across the ocean.

One significant element of missional living is growing in the grace commitment of missional praying for the least and lost. And this is best done by specifically praying for individuals or groups rather than generically for all the least and lost. As you develop the grace commitment of praying regularly for specific people, God will begin leading you into opportunities to make the gospel known to them through word and deed.

Creating a short list of people to pray for is the first step in developing a regular habit of praying for specific people. Who will you put on your list? Ask yourself these questions:

- Who are the people (individuals or groups) that I am concerned about?
- Who are the people that respect my influence? (e.g. friends, children, spouse, neighbors and colleagues)
- What are the needs in my community? (refer to the list of needs you created in unit 3 of Gospel Living)

Your mission assignment this week is to create a list of people for whom you will regularly pray throughout this year of *The Journey*. You will want to pray specifically for each person or group on your list, but your general focus should be that God would meet their needs and give you opportunities to make the gospel known to them through word and deed. Create your prayer list on the next page following the example provided. Then begin praying daily for these people and be prepared to discuss your prayer list at your next Journey Group meeting.

Example:

Name: Tony

Relationship: Friend, neighbor and occasional tennis partner

Situation/Need: Tony grew up in church but isn't a believer as far as I know. He is successful in his profession, but is divorced and sometimes feels bitter about it.

Prayer Goal: I want God to use me to help Tony see that hope and purpose are found in Christ alone and doesn't depend on his marital situation or professional success.

Prayer List:

Person/Group: _____

Relationship: _____

Situation/Need: _____

Prayer Goal: _____

Person/Group: _____

Relationship: _____

Situation/Need: _____

Prayer Goal: _____

Person/Group: _____

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Situation/Need: _____

Prayer Goal: _____

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LEARNING THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

During this section of *The Journey* you will memorize the books of the New Testament to help you get a handle on Scripture. Use the nonsense stories below (a longer version, written as a mini-play is on the next page) and the house illustration as memory aids. Then, fill in the blanks on the final page.

Foundation – Gospels: **Matthew, Mark, Luke and John** tell the story of Jesus' life and ministry.

Sub-floor – The Acts of the Apostles: **Acts** describes the early history and mission of the church.

Left Column – The Pauline Epistles: An *epistle* is an instructive letter. The Apostle Paul's (Pauline) letters were named for their recipients.

A Roman soldier (**Romans**) is walking while eating two apple cores (**I & II Corinthians**). A beautiful gal (**Galatians**) is running after him mourning her recent court fees (**Ephesians**). She has a fat lip (**Philippians**) as if someone has hit her. She sees the soldier and calls (**Colossians**) to him. She then spies two saloons (**I & II Thessalonians**) and asks him to meet her there.

Ceiling – The Pastoral Epistles: Paul wrote these letters to give pastoral counsel.

A mother looks out a window and sees that her son's pony is trampling vegetables in the garden. She cries out, "Timmy, Timmy (**I & II Timothy**), tie up (**Titus**) your filly (**Philemon**)."

Right Column – The Non-Pauline Epistles and the Revelation: These letters (except Hebrews) were named for their authors. The Revelation is a type of literature called an *apocalypse* which was written by the Apostle John.

A Hebrew scholar (**Hebrews**) is eating jams (**James**). Peter and his clone (**I & II Peter**) follow after him. They need to find a bathroom and see three porta-johns (**I, II & III John**). They race to find an empty one. Who won? The Jew did (**Jude**), because he had a revelation (**Revelation**).

Did you know?

- The 27 books of the New Testament were originally written in Greek, which was the common language of the Roman Empire.
- All the New Testament books were written before the close of the first century.
- The fish was a code symbol used by persecuted Christians under the Roman Empire. The Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, was used as an acrostic, which in English translates to *Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior*.

Foundation – Gospels: **Matthew, Mark, Luke and John** tell the story of Jesus' life and ministry.

Sub-floor – The Acts of the Apostles: **Acts** describes the early history and mission of the church.

Act 1:

The Left Column: The Pauline Epistles.

A Roman soldier (**Romans**) enters the left stage wearing full armor and eating two apple Cores with juice running down his beard (**I & II Corinthians**).

A beautiful Gal (**Galatians**) enters the right stage frantically clutching some Fees (**Ephesians**) in one hand. She also has a Fat Lip (**Philippians**) as if someone has hit her. She stops and looks for help. She sees the Centurion and Calls (**Colossians**) to him. She then spies the Two Saloons (**I & II Thessalonians**) at the back of the stage and tells the Centurion to meet her there.

Act 2:

The Ceiling: The Pastoral Epistles

A mother is looking out her kitchen window and sees her son Timmy in the garden with his pony that is trampling the vegetables. She cries out, "Timmy, Timmy (**I & II Timothy**), Tie up (**Titus**) your Filly (**Philemon**)."

Act 3:

The Right Column: Non-Pauline Epistles

A Hebrew (**Hebrews**) scholar enters the left side of the stage. He is eating jams (**James**) and it is running down his beard. Peter and his clone Peter (**I & II Peter**) enter the right side of the stage. All three of them urgently need to use the bathroom. Three porta Johns (**I, II, & III John**) are at the back of the stage, but only one of them works. The three actors race for the working one and guess who wins? The Jew Did (**Jude**). He had a Revelation (**Revelation**) about which one worked.



