



FREEDOM & HUMANITY IN THE CHURCHES

Leaders and congregations
who grow people for Christ

John Benton

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Introduction

Christianity is often misrepresented as life in a straightjacket.

It is seen as a straightjacket of religious rules and regulations, often enforced by insensitive and authoritarian church leaders. Just like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, the church is perceived as heaping duties and responsibilities upon us which do not grow us as human beings but tend to crush us, Matthew 23.4.

One of the most influential songs of the 1960s was by the Canadian / American group 'The Band' and it was titled *The Weight*. It is an example of how the world thinks of the church. Superficially, the song is about the singer's experiences on visiting a town. Here are the opening lines:

*I pulled into Nazareth, was feelin' about half past dead,
I just need a place where I can lay my head.
'Hey, Mister, can you tell me where a man might find a bed?'*
He just grinned and shook my hand, 'No', was all he said.

Notice this is not just any town. It is Nazareth, the home of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is a man coming to church, the 'hometown' of Jesus on earth, and instead of finding rest he is given no help. Rather, as the song progresses, responsibilities are heaped upon him. The chorus emphasizes, *you put the load right on me*. A Google search reveals that Robbie Robertson, the song's writer, said it was about 'the impossibility of sainthood' and its use in the film *Easy Rider* helped cement it as a defining song of its generation.

Again, the books and broadcasts of the writer Garrison Keiller were hugely popular with the public during the 1980s and 1990s. In his tales from *Lake Wobegon*, the local Catholic Church is named after 'Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility.' And the Protestants are not much better, portrayed in antiseptic terms with their waste bins emblazoned with the text, 'Touch not the unclean thing' – totally out of context. It's making the same point.

These are just two examples of many in our culture which declare that the Christian church and its message does not grow people but bruises, restricts and represses its adherents.

Living up to our caricature?

Many of us would shed the last drop of our blood to defend the 'doctrines of grace' and that salvation is a free, unearned gift. And yet, sadly, although we preach that the gospel brings true freedom and dignity to people, churches rarely do that. They frequently live up to the caricature painted of us by the world. Behind the superficial smile and handshake at the door, there is constriction. Leadership teams are often more about self-justification and controlling people than nurturing people to maturity and joy in Christ. Congregations become discouraged and unloving.

This booklet tries to explain the tragedy of this situation and to point in a different direction.

1: A defence of the 10 commandments

James tells us that God's commandments are the 'perfect law which brings freedom,' James 1.25. Later in his epistle, the context makes it clear that what he particularly has in mind are the 10 commandments. He quotes from Jesus' summary of the law, James 2.8. He then goes on to explicitly refer to the sixth and seventh commandments, James 2.8, 11. He follows that by repeating the idea of the law that brings freedom, James 2.12.

It is the thesis of this booklet that the 10 commandments are to govern Christian living and that they mark out the boundaries of behaviour and affection, within which Christians are free and enjoy liberty before God.

We are not free to sin – to go beyond the boundaries. Sin is the breaking of God's law, 1 John 3.4. But we are free to love, to serve, to pursue our God-given gifts, to be different from others, to enjoy life, indeed to flourish as human beings within those boundaries. But we begin by briefly making a case that the 10 commandments, properly understood, are a Christian's charter of emancipation. I am aware that the 10 commandments are out of fashion in some circles. But J. I. Packer encourages us to embrace them as the rule of holiness. He writes of God's requirements in human lives and says, 'These requirements are embodied in the precepts and prohibitions of the Decalogue, expounded and applied by the prophets, the apostles and Christ himself... whose life from this standpoint could be described as the law incarnate... As Paul tells us, the law... is holy, just, good and spiritual, Romans 7.12,14.¹

The 10 words

The 10 commandments stand separate from and above all the other laws of OT Israel. This is indicated by the fact that they were spoken directly by God himself, at Sinai, to the people, Exodus 20.1,19. Other laws came via Moses as intermediary. Again, it is these 10 laws alone which were inscribed 'by the finger of God' on the tablets of stone, Exodus 31.18; Deuteronomy 9.10. Furthermore, it was these tablets on which were written the 10 commandments which were kept within the ark of the covenant, Exodus 25.20-22; Hebrews 9.4. They are foundational.

¹ *Keep In Step with the Spirit*, by J I Packer, IVP, 2005 edition, page 93

The sacrificial and ceremonial laws of OT Israel are not on the same level as the 10 commandments, 1 Samuel 15.22; Hosea 6.6; Proverbs 21.3. The 10 commandments therefore cannot be simply conflated with other OT laws and dismissed as part of the old covenant which, since the coming of Christ, have no claim upon the Christian. Instead, the NT is at pains to insist that a consistent Christian life fulfils the 10 commandments, Romans 13.8-10.

The Garden of Eden

Scripture links the 10 commandments back to origin of mankind. The 4th commandment concerning the Sabbath comes about specifically because ‘in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth...but he rested the seventh day,’ Exodus 20.11. Again, the very form – ‘You shall not...’ – of commandments 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 explicitly echo the command in the Garden of Eden, ‘You shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...’, Genesis 2.17.

Both the command in Eden and the commandments at Sinai are spoken by God himself and are given in the context of freedom. Adam was free to eat from any tree in the garden, with just the one restriction, Genesis 2.16,17. The LORD had just set Israel free from slavery in Egypt when he gave the 10 commandments at Sinai, Exodus 20.2.

It is legitimate to see the 10 commandments as an exposition of what God created mankind to be in relation to himself. Made in the image of God, Genesis 1.26,27, we are made to know, worship and mirror God, hence commandments 1, 2 and 3 relating to true worship. God made Adam to be a worker, Genesis 2.15, and this is regulated and put into context by the Sabbath² – commandment 4. God created Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, Genesis 1.28, hence commandments 5, 6 and 7 – honouring our parents, no murder and the protection of marriage. The last three commandments 8, 9 and 10 guard the sanctity of property and truth and promote the avoidance of covetousness, all of which specifically relate to Satan’s temptation and the taking of the forbidden fruit in Eden, Genesis 3.1,6.

The 10 commandments, therefore, point back to our creation and the fulfilment and preservation of our identity as human beings. They are deeply concerned with who we really are, Romans 2.14,15.

²The change of the day of rest from Saturday to Sunday is to be expected. Redemption brings a change of calendar, Exodus 12.2.

Salvation

But, because of our sin, what was meant as a blessing became a curse to us, Galatians 3.10. In our fallen condition, all the commandments could do was condemn us. 'Under the law' we were lost and could never save ourselves. However, notice how the apostle Paul speaks of our salvation. 'But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons,' Gal. 4.4,5. Through Christ's perfect life, fulfilling the law, and his atoning death on the cross, by faith we are forgiven and possess a perfect righteousness before God. We are saved by God's grace alone. 'We...know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So, we too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified,' Galatians 2.15,16.

We rejoice in this freedom from the law's condemnation. We are not under law but under grace.

However, the law is not our enemy, but our friend as we pursue the Christian life. What does the LORD say of those who enjoy the blessings of the new covenant? 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people,' Jeremiah 31.33.

And notice how the apostle Paul describes the outcome of what the Lord Jesus achieved for us at the cross: 'And so he (God) condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit,' Romans 8.4.

Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that the 10 commandments are the foundational laws of the kingdom to be lived from the heart, Matthew 5.17-20.

2: Boundaries and freedom

There are two views of freedom – the world’s and the Creator’s. This quotation about the different outlooks of Humanism and Christianity, sums this up very clearly.

‘Humanism tells us to think of ourselves as having no environment save that which science...studies; no life beyond heart-stop day and no rational goals beyond self-discovery, pursuing pleasure and lessening others’ misery in the here and now.

‘Christianity teaches us to view God as our ultimate environment; to know him in and through the persons, things and values that surround us; and to see ourselves as immortal beings of infinite worth whose calling for all eternity is to know God who made us and loved us, to love him and our fellow men in return, and to experience joy in so doing...

‘Humanism regards religion as hobbling mankind and holds that no-one is healthy in spirit until he has left religion behind. Christianity sees this view as an irrational negating of mankind’s deepest instincts and intuitions...’³

The world looks for a freedom that means no boundaries except those we impose on ourselves. It takes an ‘it’s my life for me to do what I want with’ approach. But if we believe that God created us and loves us, we can see that to operate outside our Maker’s instructions will be the way to disaster, not freedom. Jesus said that it is the truth which sets us free, John 8.32, not having no truth or making your own truth.

The gymnast

This view of freedom is so alien to the twenty-first century that it requires some explaining.

This analogy might help us. Think of an Olympic gymnast. She is able to perform spectacular somersaults, leaps, aerial pirouettes and the like, which are way beyond the ability of most of us. She has a freedom which we do not have. She acquired that freedom, of course, by practice and discipline.

Imagine that the place she practises in is a large gymnasium. To acquire her

³ *Christianity: The True Humanism*, by Thomas Howard and J I Packer, Regent College Publishing, 1985, page 14.

freedom, she had to pursue her athleticism within the boundary walls of the gym. This is where she is safe and can develop and learn her skills. But to try to burst through the gym walls would lead to injury, maybe serious injury, not freedom. To practise in the car park might end in her colliding with a vehicle and leave her an invalid for life. Observing the boundaries meant freedom.

Just so, the commands of God give us our safe boundaries within which to practise our lives. Development and freedom do not come automatically. As with the athlete, we need discipline and determination to fulfil our potential. But ignoring the walls, pretending there are no boundaries, will lead to disaster, Romans 6.23. This helps us to see why the view of freedom adopted by secular humanism is wrong and frequently leads to disaster. Many an addict or broken family is a sad indicator of this.

But equally, going back to our initial concerns expressed in the introduction, the church is there to maintain the walls of the gymnasium but not to shackle those or put obstacles in the way of those who are trying to use the gym to become the fully rounded human beings God would have them be. Within God's boundaries, we are to be free.

'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law,' Galatians 5.22.

Doctrine and duty

The 10 commandments are usefully summarized in terms of our attitude towards God and our attitude towards our fellow human beings (there is an overlap on commandment 4).

So, asked which is the most important commandment Jesus replied, 'The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself,' Mark 12.29-31.

We love God because he has saved us. We have come into this life of freedom and liberty, bounded by God's commandments, by free grace in Christ. He set us free.

We love God when we worship and willingly obey him, John 14.15. We embrace all that God has revealed of himself across Biblical history, culminating in the

Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Trinitarian God – one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who loves sinners and who at the cross made the once-for-all atonement which releases us from the guilt of our sin and opens the door to eternal life, evidenced by the resurrection of Jesus, for all who will believe.

We love our neighbours as we treat them as precious souls made in the image of God. Jesus said, 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets,' Matthew 7.12.

The underlying truth here is that love fulfils the law – whether it is love to God or love to our fellow men, Romans 13.8.

3: Threats to freedom and humanity

How does a church come to leave the fresh air of Biblical freedom and love?
How do we end up living out the world's caricature of church, rather than being the outposts of heaven on earth that we ought to be?

Let me suggest three roots of this tragic condition.

The loss of cultural vision

A first way in which the church loses freedom is that it becomes dull. The glorious gospel is reduced to being concerned only with the 'spiritual' side of life as if nothing else is worth bothering with. The world is seen only as a threat to our walk with God. All sermons tend to end up saying 'trust more', 'pray more' and 'evangelize more'. There is little of God giving us all things richly to enjoy, 1 Timothy 6.17. Such a church produces 'cookie cutter' Christians, in which, with the merest of differences, everyone is expected to be basically the same. The atmosphere of such a church is claustrophobic. Legitimate diversity is stifled. No-one seems free to be themselves.

But this is not what we find in Scripture. Daniel is very different from Samson, Ruth very unlike Rahab, Mary quite the opposite of Martha. By comparison with the great diversity of Christians of the past – J. S. Bach writing his cantatas, William Wilberforce battling against slavery, James Clerk Maxwell studiously mapping the science of electro-magnetism, Josephine Butler rescuing fallen women from lives of degradation – we are culturally unengaged and many contemporary Christians are downright boring. No wonder we have difficulty evangelizing – we offer so little of real interest or thoughtful challenge to our times.

Listen to Francis Schaeffer: 'The gospel is great. If you are a Christian you should be convinced that Biblical Christianity is not tawdry; it is not a small thing dealing with a small area of life...realize that Christianity is titanic. It speaks to every need of man, not by a leap in the dark but by good and sufficient reasons. In presenting the content of Christianity, Paul says there is salvation – justification, sanctification and glorification – for the whole man.'⁴

⁴ *Death in the City*, by Francis Schaeffer, IVP, 1972, page 76

The hold of legalistic religion

Salvation is by faith alone, Romans 1.17. We trust the Lord Jesus. We have no guarantee except his faithfulness. All we have is his promise to save.

But the fallen religious human psyche can crave for what it sees as more certainty – to be in control of salvation itself. We desire a check-list of boxes which we have ticked and so can assure ourselves that ‘now God must save me’. This is where, in its various forms, legalism originates. ‘God is under obligation to save me because I’ve kept the rules.’ Theoretically we might know we can’t perfectly keep God’s commandments to earn salvation, but we turn our approximate keeping of the commandments (and other rules) into assurances for ourselves that we are saved or that we are the kind of people that God ‘ought’ to save – because we are ‘godly’. In this way we have taken charge of our destiny but, in effect, have departed from faith and grace.

And three things happen. *First*, we tend to make the check-list as long as possible, because the more boxes we can tick the more certainty we think we have of salvation. So, like the Pharisees, we multiply rules, perhaps about things like food or dancing or women wearing make-up etc. *Second*, we become judgmental and condemnatory, because the more faults we see in others, the surer we are that we are ‘good’ people by comparison. *Third*, within this system, many conclude that they are ‘good’ people, better than others, Luke 18.9, and become proud, distant and unpleasant.

Writing to a church where such attitudes were taking over, Paul asks, ‘What has happened to all your joy?’ Galatians 4.15. In a legalistic church, the wonder of grace disappears. This is, indeed, life in a straightjacket. But it is not the gospel.

The failure of pastoral affection

The apostle Paul describes the work of a Christian leader towards a church like this: ‘For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you to his kingdom and glory,’ 1 Thessalonians 2.11, 12.

First of all, a father loves his own children, and Christian leaders should have a deep affection for the people of their congregations. *Second*, although a father should control his children, his central concern is to help and encourage them grow up to maturity, to reach their full potential. That should be the chief aim of a church leader for his people too.

But often the affection and the true aim that should govern the outlook of church leaders goes missing. When that happens, the church is no longer a happy family but becomes something ugly and oppressive. Absence of affection in church leaders can occur for many reasons.

- *Pride* A pastor can see his church as a vehicle for his own success. He does not so much serve the church as use the church. What matters is his own reputation. Elders can care more about their title than their people, Matthew 23.7.
- *Tiredness* Sometimes elders have taxing full-time jobs and seeking to care for the church as well simply becomes too much for them. They lose the joy of serving Christ and his people. They are worn out and adopt a 'couldn't care less' attitude, 1 Peter 5.2.
- *Grand designs* A leadership team can fall into focusing on 'the big picture' while losing sight of individuals in need. Churches can be more concerned to grow numerically than to care for their existing members. Building projects become more important than little old ladies who need to be visited and comforted.
- *Lack of patience* Often high-flying people with huge abilities become leaders in the church. But such people can be frustrated by those who are slow or less able in the church, and vent that frustration, 1 Thessalonians 5.14.

'You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally,' Ezekiel 34.4.

Above all else a church needs love in its leadership, 1 Corinthians 13.1-7.

4: The marks of a cult

The freedom we are talking about includes a freedom to be different – for people to be honest and be themselves without pretending. It embraces, for example, people being able to ask questions in the church without being labelled awkward or a troublemaker. With this in mind, it is worth thinking about some of the differences between a healthy church and a cult.

Cult	NT Church
The head of the cult is a dominant person in the group to whom others always defer	The head of the church is Jesus Christ who is now in heaven ⁵
The cult leader encourages devotion to himself / herself	Church leaders encourage devotion only to Jesus Christ who died and rose for us ⁶
The cult leader does not have any real accountability	Church leaders are accountable to the church meeting and ultimately to Christ ⁷
The ethos of a cult is control of its members	The ethos of a church is to grow its members ⁸
Leaders dictate in great detail all aspects of a follower's life	Under Scripture alone, all Christian believers have freedom ⁹
A cult tends to keep its members under as much surveillance as possible	A church cares for its people pastorally but respects privacy and conscience ¹⁰
A cult may deliberately over-ride a family's life and responsibilities	A church will respect family life and only very reluctantly step in to take issue with it ¹¹
A cult isolates people and likes its members to socialize only within the group	Christians should enjoy fellowship within church but do good in the wider community ¹²
A cult fosters a 'them' and 'us' mentality towards the world	A church sees the world as lost but reaches out in love to fellow sinners ¹³

Cult	NT Church
A cult tends to be secretive	A church aims to be as open as possible ¹⁴
A cult will receive members gladly but often make it extremely difficult to leave	A church is sad when people leave, but handles that in love ¹⁵

Most churches are not cults, but sometimes they can err by taking on some of the characteristics of a cult. Cults often take what is good in churches and exaggerate or distort these things for their own ends. Hence churches or leaders who lose their Biblical balance can take a cultish path with a consequent loss of freedom and humanity for the congregation.

Cults tend to damage people psychologically. They ultimately belittle people and crush them. All human beings are made in God's image, Genesis 1.26, 27, and should not be manipulated or lied to in any way, but treated with respect.

Making clones

Also, cults tend to make clones – everybody in the same mould, everyone the same. Their adherents can all trot out the cult's same pat answers to everything. They even tend to dress the same way. But this trying to make everyone the same is actually devilish. This is how C. S. Lewis puts it in an imagined directive between two devils in *The Screwtape Letters*.

'Remember always, that He (God) really likes the little vermin (human beings), and sets absurd value on the distinctness of every one of them. When he talks about their losing their selves, He only means abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever...He hates to see them drifting away from their own nature... And we should always encourage them to do so.'¹⁶

⁵ Ephesians 1.21

⁷ Matthew 18.17; 1 Timothy 5.19,20

⁹ Matthew 23.9; Galatians 5.1

¹¹ 1 Timothy 5.16

¹³ Luke 15.1,2

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 16.12; 2 Timothy 4.10

¹⁶ *The Screwtape Letters*, by C S Lewis, Fount Paperbacks, 1998, page 50

⁶ John 14.15; 1 Corinthians 16.22

⁸ Romans 15.14

¹⁰ 1 Peter 5.2,3; 1 Corinthians 3.5

¹² Romans 15.14

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 4.2; 8.20, 21

5: The dignity of the church meeting

The New Testament teaches a congregational form of church government, Acts 11.22; Acts 14.27; 1 Corinthians 5.4. Ultimately the church makes the decisions.

The elders, or leaders, have a certain authority in the church, 1 Thessalonians 5.12-14, but it is an authority for the good of the people and subject to the word of God and to the gathered church. Hence it is the gathered church which appoints leaders, Acts 6.3,4, and to whom leaders must answer if they go astray, 1 Timothy 5.19, 20. Among other things, therefore, the church meeting provides a mechanism for checking and balancing the leadership's power. The church meeting must therefore be treated with great respect.

The keys of the kingdom

The NT word translated 'church' is *ekklesia* – which basically means an assembly of people. In both the OT and Greek backgrounds to the NT, that word also carries a political / authoritative idea with it.

In Matthew 18.15-20 this is unpacked for us by the Lord Jesus Christ. There, a scenario of a problem between a couple of Christ's followers is explored. After two previous attempts to resolve it quietly, the final court of appeal is the church (not the elders), v17. The Lord Jesus says that the church has authority: 'whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' To bind or loose is the work of a judge as he applies the law of the kingdom in which he operates. He sends people to prison or releases them. Elsewhere, the power to bind and loose spiritually is related to the foundational apostles, Matthew 16.19, and is referred to as 'the keys of the kingdom.' There are no more foundational apostles today, but the keys now rest with the gathered church.

Jesus goes on to say, 'I tell you the truth that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them,' v19,20. The small numbers convey the fact that it is not size but agreement in Christ which is the crucial factor. The church gathered together and agreeing together has kingdom authority because Christ himself is there among them, v20. Free agreement together is vital.

One of the corollaries of this is that for good church government, members must be people who feel able to speak up and express their thoughts that there may

be true agreement. This requires a loving atmosphere, free from threat or coercion, and respect for each other in Christ.

What goes wrong?

Healthy discussion in the church meeting is often absent these days. Why is that?

First, it can arise from a good motive. Perhaps the church has known a period of blessing under the leadership – praise God – and there is a genuine desire on the part of members not to disturb that. But the trouble is that it can easily spill over into keeping quiet even when members know that things aren't right.

Second, it can arise when members are simply a group of shy people and the leadership has never gently but persistently encouraged them to take responsibility and contribute to a church meeting. Maybe the leadership simply feel that if they don't drive the meeting nothing will ever get done.

Third, silence reigns when members are too busy as people and just want to get meetings over with and get home. This is to fail to treat the church meeting with the dignity it deserves.

Fourth, silence can arise through a mistaken view of spirituality, which brings fear. To raise a question is not the same as being a grumbler. To raise a question is not to threaten the unity of the church. To raise a question is not to be disloyal to the leadership – it may actually come from a desire to help them.

Fifth, the silence can prevail because of a few unhelpful church members who just love the opportunity to sound off belligerently at the leadership much to everyone's unhappiness. And so, sadly, anyone with questions, gets tarred with the same brush – troublemaker.

Sixth, of course, it can arise from the **pride** among the leadership team or in the pastor's heart. They are a leadership which needs to be seen to be 'right' all the time or else they think their authority is undermined. They find means to censor

or manipulate what can and can't be said at the meeting.

Seventh, it can occur because of **fear** in the leadership. They are desperate for nothing to go wrong. So, they try to 'micro-manage' the church meeting and make sure nothing is said that might be challenging for them. Again, this comes from an eldership mindset which feels it must control the church rather than nurture it.

One another

Instead of this, Christ intended that churches should be places where, within the essentials of God's truth, there is freedom and humanity.

With this in mind, the NT is full of encouragements for the people of the church to treat each other well. Because we are all members of the body of Christ, we should love one another, John 13.34; forgive one another, Ephesians 4.32; encourage one another, Hebrews 3.13; accept one another, Romans 15.7; honour one another, Romans 12.10; build up one another, Ephesians 4.29. It is such a church which will be in the best condition to agree with one another in Christ and be the church Christ would have us be.

6: Freedom to be ourselves in Christ

The argument has been that the 10 commandments, properly understood in the light of Christ, mark out for us the safe area within which we are free to be ourselves as Christians.

We have also mentioned how that free area is to be used. The apostle Paul tells us, 'You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself"', Galatians 5.13,14.

The words of the Lord Jesus fill this out for us both horizontally and vertically. We are to love our neighbour and we are to love God, Matthew 22.37-40. Jesus said, 'If you love me, you will obey what I command,' John 14.13.

Different people with different gifts

Though we are all made in the image of God, James 3.9, God has not made us all to be the same. Just as there is diversity within the unity of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God – there is diversity within the human race. The first and most obvious expression of this fact is that we are male and female. But even apart from our gender, the Bible is clear that God knit us together in our mother's womb and ordained our days even before we came to be. He made Samson for the role of warrior he had planned for him, Judges 13.3-6, and he also made Jeremiah to be a prophet, Jeremiah 1.5. They were very different men, but God made them both. This does not mean that we are not responsible for our sins, but it does mean there is a legitimate difference of personality between people, which ought to be respected in the church.

Further, God has gifted his people differently. There are natural gifts, like those for music and mathematics, for caring and for carpentry. And there are also gifts particularly given by the Holy Spirit, for example, preaching or spiritual insight. And both of those sets of gifts are to be recognized and put to use in the church. The apostle Paul spells this out. 'Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, who are many, form one body and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts according to the grace given us,' Romans 12.4-6.

And in writing about gifts to the church in Corinth, Paul specifically warns against trying to make everyone the same or rejecting those who aren't like us. 'The eye

cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”” 1 Corinthians 12.21.

God has given a true diversity in the church, which should be cherished and held together in unity. In many ways, this diversity – not least racial diversity – is the glory of the church, Ephesians 3.6-12. The elders’ role is to help the congregation embrace legitimate differences and encourage the development of gifts and God’s grace expressed differently in various personalities. We should be free to be the people God has made us to be.

Serving one another in love

The word of God teaches us that we are not saved by good works but we are saved *for* good works, 2 Timothy 1.9; Ephesians 2.10. Because God has shown us such kindness in Christ, we find ourselves wanting to show kindness to others.

So, a common misconception of the gospel can be represented by the equation

$$\text{Faith} + \text{Good works} = \text{Salvation}$$

This is a huge mistake. But the true gospel can be represented by this equation

$$\text{Faith} = \text{Salvation} + \text{Good Works}$$

When we trust the Lord Jesus Christ, all our sins are forgiven forever, we are born of God’s Spirit and heaven is ours because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – we are saved. But this experience of God’s love prompts love towards others and so faith is accompanied by doing good. These good works will inevitably be an expression of our own unique personalities and the different gifts God has given us. Our good deeds will find different avenues because we are different people. Also, different situations call for different kinds of responses. The expertise that one person has might be just right to meet a certain crisis, when others would not know how to help.

Hence, we find in Scripture a huge variety of different activities through which God’s people express their love. Here is just a taste:

- The members of the Jerusalem church shared what they had and made sure no-one was in need, Acts 2.44,45.

- By the power of Jesus, Peter healed the lame man who begged outside the temple, Acts 3.7, 8.
- Barnabas was known for the way he encouraged others, Acts 4.36; Acts 9.26, 27.
- The church did its best to look after widows in need, Acts 6.1; 1 Timothy 5.16.
- Dorcas made clothes for people in need, Acts 9.39.
- The church at Antioch sent aid to those in Judea facing famine, Acts 11.29.
- Lydia, a business woman and the first convert at Philippi, gave hospitality to Paul and Silas, missionaries to Europe, Acts 16.15.
- Paul cared and prayed for those on board the ship that was taking him as a prisoner to Rome, Acts 27.10, 21-26; 34.
- Paul was used by God to heal the father of Publius and others on the island of Malta, Acts 28.8,9.

We find deep satisfaction as people when we are able to use the gifts God has given us to help others and to serve the cause of Christ. 'Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God,' 1 Peter 2.16. As diverse people freely and lovingly use their gifts, a wonderful humanity emerges in the church.

7: Shop window for the love of Jesus

Churches should not be held together by fear – fear of what other people think or fear of church leaders. Churches should be held together by love – love for Christ and love for one another.

When Barnabas came down from Jerusalem to visit the new church in Antioch, ‘he saw the evidence of the grace of God (and) he was glad,’ Acts 11.23. You could see that these people had been touched by the kindness and forgiveness of God. You could see it in the joy and peace on their faces. You could see it in the love and grace with which they treated one another. You could see it in their love for God in heartfelt worship. In that way, the church had become a showcase for the gospel. Loud and clear this church proclaimed and demonstrated to the world ‘this is what Jesus can do!’ It was a shop window for what the love of Jesus can do in the lives of ordinary people. It was a glorious sight. To go to church was not a burden. We can imagine that people couldn’t wait to get there.

The Spirit-filled church

The Holy Spirit works in our lives to make us more like Jesus. We are empowered to become imitators of Christ. In that sense, when people come to church, they should meet Jesus.

In one of his excellent books, my old pastor, Stuart Olyott, describes visiting such a church. Let me quote him at length.¹⁷

‘What would we find...

‘Everybody speaks to us and welcomes us! We notice, too, that everybody speaks to everybody else. No doubt some people have special friendships within the church, just like Jesus did within the Twelve. But those friendships are maintained without there being any cliques. No one feels unnoticed, undervalued or left out – whether they be men or women, old or young, local or from elsewhere, newly converted or spiritually mature, educated or illiterate, introvert or extravert. Running through the church is a deep consciousness that we “are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...all one in Christ Jesus,” Galatians 3.26, 27.

¹⁷ *Be Filled with the Spirit*, by Stuart Olyott, Evangelical Press, 2020, page 50-52

‘And notice what people are talking about! Each person is aware that their tongue exists for the praise of God, and also for the benefit of the person they are speaking to. There is conversation about all the normal things of life, but it is savoured and flavoured with references to Scripture, to hymns and to spiritual songs. Not only so, but it quickly becomes clear to us that everyone is genuinely thankful to the Lord for everything that has ever happened to them, as well as for what is happening to them now. We don’t hear a whine or a whinge from anyone. These people – all of them – are content! They are bathing every day in the goodness of God.

‘And what shall we say about their singing? There is an amazing variety in what they sing, but their great theme is always the same; it is about the Lord Himself. With their whole heart they sing to Him and *about* Him. Everybody joins in. Their interest, it seems, is not in the music as such, and certainly not in the instruments, choirs or song-leaders. This worship is not man-centred, woman-centred or child-centred. This is a congregation joining as one to fix the whole of its attention, and all of its affections, on the Triune God – the Father of each child in the redeemed family; the Lord Jesus Christ by whom they came to the Father; and the Holy Spirit by whom the Saviour lives in their individual hearts.

‘Is there anything else to be said about this church? Yes; as we get to know everybody better, we find there is no rivalry among these people. There are no attention seekers, no personalities trying to dominate, no displays of self-importance, no jealousies, no resentments, no plotting groups, and no huddles and unkind critics. Everyone in the church seems to think that everybody else is more important than they are! The deep secret place of every heart is inhabited by the affectionate fear of God.’

This is how church ought to be. This is a church where every person is precious. There is gospel freedom and true humanity.

A little heaven down here

The future of the churches will not be served by the straightjacket of fear brought about by domineering leaders and condemnatory congregations. We must thoroughly and deeply repent before God of the way we have disfigured the beauty and humanity of the church through such things.

The future of the churches must lay in love. We are to walk in God’s ways and set people free to serve with all that they are and all that they have.

Our Kenyan brothers and sisters in Christ often sing a little chorus in church from which we could learn a great deal.

*The time to be happy is now
The place to be happy is here
And the way to be happy
Is to make someone happy
And to have a little heaven down here*

Jesus said, 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,' John 13.34, 35.