

A Gospel for the Twenty-First Century

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The Gospel for the Church

In the last lesson, we heard Jesus make a remarkable statement. In **John 17:9**, he declared:

“...I am not praying for the world, *but for those you have given me...*”

As we looked at the context of **John 17**, we discovered that Jesus’ prayer focused on the Church and not the world because God’s solution for the world is the Church. We are the Gospel incarnated – the good news for this generation!

In **John 17:20-23**, we discovered the specific content of Jesus’ prayer for his Church:

“My prayer is not for [my disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, *that all of them may be one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us *so that the world may believe that you have sent me*. I have given [my Church] the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. *May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me...*”

So, from this passage, we discover four things:

- The focus of Jesus’ prayer is not the world but the Church.
- This is because the Church is God’s answer to the world.
- The focus of Jesus’ prayer for his Church is unity.
- This is because it is the unity of the Church that will cause the world to believe.

And as we saw in **Module 102**, this same principle is reflected in **Romans 16:25-26**, which states:

“Now to him who is able to *establish you by my gospel* and the proclamation of Jesus Christ...*so that all nations might believe and obey him.*”

The salvation of the world is God’s first *motivation*. His eyes are constantly upon a lost world. But his strategy for reaching this lost world is the Church. For this

The Gospel for the World

▶ The Gospel for the Church ◀

The Gospel for Israel

The Gospel for Youth

The Gospel for the End Times

reason, his work within his Church holds first *priority*. It is only through a pure Church that the world will be truly reached for Christ. It's no wonder, then, that Jesus said, "I am not praying for the world, *but for those you have given me.*" And this strategy of prayer for his Church continues even today, for **Hebrews 7:25** tells us that Jesus "always lives to intercede for them." Who is it that he "always lives to intercede" for? Those who have believed on him!

Understanding the Present Ministry of Christ

According to **Ephesians 1:20-21**, Christ is now seated "at [the Father's] right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come." And all this authority and power – how is it exercised? **Verses 22-23** tells us how the authority of Christ operates:

"And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything *for the church*, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

This passage reveals two important facts about the present position of the Lord Jesus Christ:

- **Christ is in a position of rest** – He is *seated* at God's right hand, which means that there is nothing further for him to do. His work of salvation is 100% complete (**Hebrews 9:25-28**). He is 100% victorious over the works of Satan (**1 John 3:8**). He has in his hands the keys of death and Hades (**Revelation 1:18**). He is in a state of rest. Nothing more needs to be done.
- **Christ is in a position of supremacy** – He is seated *at the right hand* of the Father, which means he has the Firstborn right to exercise authority on the Father's behalf. Yet that firstborn right (the fact that "God placed everything under his feet" and that God "appointed [Christ] to be head over everything" is expressly stated as being for the Church! In other words, Christ's Firstborn rights are now being exercised through his Church, which is described as "his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

If that isn't mindblowing, what is? We are not some loose appendage of Christ, an afterthought, an "accident" that happened along the way. We are his very body, an extension of himself. Our identities are so closely intertwined that his life is our life, his purpose our purpose, his authority our authority.

Read Matthew 28:18-20

Read Colossians 1:17-18

Once again, in these verses, we see Christ's total authority being exercised in and through his Church. No wonder **Hebrews 7:25** tells us that Jesus "always lives to intercede" for us! He has invested everything into us! He has no backup strategy, no hidden card, no Plan B. We are it! And so he is praying for us – praying that we will be everything that he has called us to be!

The Focus of Christ's Intercession

Because he is seated at the right hand of the Father, in a position of complete rest, Jesus now has only one responsibility – intercession. And his prayer in **John 17** still forms the core of his intercession. He is praying for his Church, that we will be one, just as he and the Father are one, so that the world will be impacted by the message of the Gospel enacted through our lives.

But even though Christ's present job description has only one item on the list, the Lord still has his work cut out for him. The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, described in **Ephesians 1:23** as “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way,” is in great need of heavenly intercession.

George Barna reports that “fewer than 10 percent of American Christians actually possess a biblical worldview, a perceptual filter through which they see life and its opportunities. Lacking that filter, most Christians make important decisions on the basis of instinct, emotion, assumptions, past experience, external pressure, or chance.”¹

The diagnosis has come in, and it doesn't look good. Polls of the Western Church reveal that we “desire experience more than knowledge. We prefer choices not absolutes. We embrace preferences rather than truths. We seek comfort rather than growth. Faith must come in our terms or we reject it. We have enthroned ourselves as the final arbiters of righteousness, the ultimate rulers of our own experience and destiny. We are the Pharisees of the new millennium.”²

Paul himself warned Timothy of a future condition in the Church, where people would “turn their ears away from the truth.” In **2 Timothy 4:3-4**, he writes:

“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”

In **2 Timothy 4:1-4**, Paul provides a more graphic description of what happens when “men will not put up with sound doctrine.” He warns:

“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.”

The Amplified Bible translates **2 Thessalonians 2:3** in this way:

“Let no one deceive or beguile you in any way, for [the return of the Lord] will not come except the apostasy comes first – that is, unless the [predicted] great falling away of those who have professed to be Christians has come...”

In the light of such an unsettling prediction, we need to continually assess the

Church's health in the light of the "sound doctrine" of the Gospel. So let's recap what **Module 102** revealed concerning the four toxic gospels that have infiltrated church life. This is worth reiterating, because we cannot fully grasp the Gospel's answer for the Church until we understand the gaps in the Church's appropriation of the Gospel. There can be no prescription without a diagnosis.

Toxic Gospel #1 – Legalism

Legalism is the oldest enemy of the Gospel. Paul fought it continually as he sought to protect the Gentile churches from the infiltration of the Judaizers. In fact, he devoted one whole epistle (**Galatians**) to refuting the seductive pull of legalism.

Legalism comes in two virulent strains:

- **Hardcore legalism** – In its purest form, hardcore legalism demands a complete reversion to an adherence to the Sinai Covenant, or at least its broad precepts. Works is seen as the basis of salvation and the sole basis for pleasing God.
- **Softcore legalism** – In this subtler form, softcore legalism emphasizes self-effort as the means by which a Christian grows into the likeness of Christ. Outward standards become the basis by which the Christian evaluates his own life and the lives of those around him. Without realizing it, he has truly become one of "the Pharisees of the new millennium."

The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ strikes at the heart of legalism, whether hardcore or softcore, and shows it to be the bankrupt philosophy that it is. Although its outward goals may appear good, it can only produce "fruit for death" (**Romans 7:5**). In fact, the pitiful condition of the legalistic Christian is graphically portrayed in **Romans 7:14-24**, and the constant struggle depicted there is a classic symptom of legalism.* As Paul declared in **Romans 7:6**:

"But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from [a legalistic lifestyle] so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."

Legalism has infected a significant proportion of the Church today, effectively paralyzing the Body of Christ. What is the cure? Like all the other toxic gospels, there is only one answer. Massive doses of the true Gospel of Christ, administered on a daily basis.

Toxic Gospel #2 – Intellectualism

Another subtle trap is intellectualism. Paul was a scholar and an intellectual giant. But he purposely avoided leaning upon the human intellect as a principal means of furthering the growth of the Church. In **1 Corinthians 1:17**, he was adamant when he declared:

* Although an endless struggle with sin is a classic symptom of legalism, other toxic gospels also produce similar symptoms. You must always remember that Romans 7 is describing what happens when the raw old self is exposed to the holy standard of God and seeks to abide by God's righteous requirements. The old self then shows itself to be exactly what it is – morally bankrupt and powerless to effect any kind of self-induced change.

“For Christ did not send me...to preach the gospel...with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”

As J B Phillips renders this verse:

“And I have not [preached the Gospel] by the persuasiveness of clever words, for I have no desire to rob the cross of its power.”

The Gospel is not anti-intellectual. You don't need to commit “intellectual suicide” in order to follow Jesus. When Paul testified before Festus, he described his own testimony as “true and reasonable” (**Acts 26:25**), and when he spoke before the top philosophers of Athens in **Acts 17:22-34**, his speech was reasoned and intellectually sound. But at the same time, Paul did not “rob the cross of its power.” For in **1 Corinthians 1:18-21**, Paul identifies the nature of the Gospel:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.”

Christian bookstores are filled with books that repackage the latest popular psychology and self-help systems in Christian terminology. But the Gospel tells us it is not *what* you know but *who* you know that matters. Only the power of God can truly transform a person's life, and it is only the Gospel of Christ that releases the power of God. This is why Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 2:1-5**:

“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified...* My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, *but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power*, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.”

Toxic Gospel #3 – Mysticism

Mysticism is one of the most hideous errors that can creep into church life, precisely because it appears so “spiritual.” In **Colossians 2:18**, Paul warns:

“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.”

Mysticism (also called neo-gnosticism) has poisoned many Christian lives. It draws a person's focus upon the angelic or the demonic, teaching “Satan's so-called deep secrets” (**Revelation 2:24**) and multiplying “idle notions.”

The deeper a person delves into mysticism, the hazier the line becomes between what he believes and what the New Ager believers. This is because New Age religion is the heir of the mystical tradition.

The error of mysticism is founded upon a subjective, feel-good approach to God and spiritual matters, where the believer's personal experience is what determines the validity of spiritual truth. But there is only one yardstick against which truth can be measured, and that is the Gospel of Christ.

Toxic Gospel #4 – Carnalism

Last, but by no means least, is the toxic gospel of carnalism, or worldliness. This was the toxic gospel that had gripped the Corinthian church, where every kind of strife and immoral practice was surfacing.

Just as there are two strains of legalism, so there are two strains of carnalism:

- **Hardcore carnalism** – In its purest form, hardcore carnalism involves the belief that it doesn't matter how a Christian lives, God still loves him. Immorality and other expressions of worldly behavior are "OK" because we are now under grace. But Paul is clear concerning such error: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (**1 Corinthians 6:9-11**).
- **Softcore carnalism** – In this subtler form, softcore carnalism emphasizes that believing in Jesus is all about "the good life." God is, after all, primarily concerned about your happiness, and wants to bless you and prosper you, so that you can have all the material comforts that this world can offer. Right? Wrong! Of course, God does bless and prosper, but his goal is to conform you to the likeness of Christ, and this path of growth takes you away from conforming to this world. As Paul emphasizes in **Romans 12:2**: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

But whether the carnalism is hardcore or softcore, the effect on the Christian life is the same. The Christian is reduced to a shadowy facsimile of God's glorious intension, someone who has "a form of godliness but denying its power" (**2 Timothy 3:5**).

Having diagnosed the Church's sickness as Gospel-deficiency, God's prescription is – you guessed it – an steady infusion of the Gospel of Christ. After all, the Lord Jesus set the pace in **Ephesians 5:25-27**:

"...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, *cleansing her by the washing with water through the word*, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

God's Goal for the Church

God has a goal. Individually, this goal is that each believer be conformed to the likeness of Christ (**Romans 8:29**). This individual process of transformation is spelt out clearly in **2 Corinthians 3:18**:

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, *are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory*, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

But what about the Church as a whole? What is God's goal for this worldwide community he calls “the body of Christ”? **Ephesians 4:12** reveals God's corporate plan for his Church:

“...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, *attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*”

This is what the whole Bible narrative (from the earliest pages of **Genesis** right through to the closing chapters of **Revelation**) has been leading up to: the “revealing of the sons of God” (**Romans 8:19**, NKJV). Or, as J B Phillips phrases it: “...the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own.”

How is this going to come about? Well, that's the nature of the Gospel (“good news”) for the Church! What God has planned, he will do! After all, “he who began a good work in you [plural] *will carry it on to completion* until the day of Christ Jesus” (**Philippians 1:6**). And we know that “no plan of [God's] can be thwarted” (**Job 42:2**).

But the context of **Ephesians 4:12** reveals the *method* by which God will carry his goal on to completion:

- **Ephesians 4:11** – The primary tools that God uses to bring his Church to maturity are his leaders, particularly the five-fold leadership gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. Only as the leadership of the Church has a clear vision of God's glorious goal, and works together to teach the clear foundations of the Gospel, will the Church begin to rise to her full potential in Christ.
- **Ephesians 4:12** – The primary function of church leadership, however, is to “prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” The Church will not mature if the leadership alone does the ministry; it is only as God's people are prepared for “works of service” that the Church will be built up and equipped for reaching this lost world.
- **Ephesians 4:13** – This verse specifies what is meant by the term “to become mature.” It involves reaching “unity in the faith” and “unity...in the knowledge of the Son of God” (which in turn clarifies what Jesus meant in **John 17:23** when he prayed: “May they be brought to *complete* unity...” This is not merely an organizational unity, but rather an organic unity that is “in the faith” and “in the knowledge of the Son of God.” True unity can only be found in the Gospel of Christ.

- **Ephesians 4:14** – This describes the practical expression of the maturity mentioned in the previous verse. Maturity in Christ means that “we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.” Once again, it is God’s Word which acts as the strong foundation upon which Christian lives are built.
- **Ephesians 4:15** – The act of “speaking the truth in love” is characteristic of growth toward maturity in Christ. The truth that we speak is the truth of the Gospel, applied in love through teaching and mutual encouragement.
- **Ephesians 4:16** – One of the marks of emerging maturity in Christ is the organic nature of our fellowship with one another. We are described as a body “joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Ultimately it is this organic unity that is going to attract multitudes more into the kingdom of God.

Few Christians fully appreciate just how high God has set his goal for the Church! Looking back at **John 17:20-23**, we see that this is no token unity. Jesus has asked his Father for:

- **Highest unity** – not the lowest common denominator! He prays: “...may [they] be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...that they may be one as we are one...” (**John 17:21-22**).
- **Complete unity** – not partial unity! He prays: “...May they be brought to *complete* unity...” (**John 17:23**).

We tend to allow past experience and present circumstances to reduce our thinking, but God’s activity in his Church today is totally motivated by the goal he has set, and what he has declared *will* come to pass! As **Isaiah 9:7** reminds us:

“...The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

Embracing the Glory

Read Psalm 72:19

From the dawn of creation, God’s plan has never changed. In **Habakkuk 2:14**, the Lord states his purpose clearly:

“For the earth will be filled with the *knowledge* of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”

He has desired that the *knowledge* of his glory would fill the heavens and the earth. His glory *already* fills heaven and earth (**Numbers 4:21; Psalm 19:1; Isaiah 6:3**), but he plans for this glory to be fully known and appreciated. This is why this same goal is restated in **Isaiah 40:5** with these words:

“And the glory of the Lord *will be revealed*, and all mankind together *will see it*. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

The glory of the Lord already fills the earth. But God plans for there to be a *revealing* of the *knowledge* of the glory of God “as the waters cover the sea.”

How does God plan to reveal his glory? **Ephesians 3:10-11** tells us:

“His intent was that now, *through the church*, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Even today, the Church truly fills the earth “as the waters cover the sea.” Thus it is primarily through his Church that the Lord is revealing his glory to the world. We are the “light of the world” (**Matthew 5:14**). We are the “city on a hill [that] cannot be hidden” (**Matthew 5:14**). We are “the temple of the living God” (**2 Corinthians 6:14**), “a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (**Ephesians 2:22**). We are “the church of the firstborn” (**Hebrews 12:23**), “the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (**1 Timothy 3:15**), “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (**Ephesians 1:23**). We are the ones for whom “creation waits in eager expectation” (**Romans 8:19**).

What we need always to remember is that we are not trying to attain to this glory. We already have the glory of Christ, for in **John 17:22-23**, Jesus declared:

“I *have* given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me...”

The process of God revealing his glory through the Church has already begun. This is an “ever-increasing glory” (**2 Corinthians 3:18**, NIV), and God is in the process of transforming us “from glory to glory” (**2 Corinthians 3:18**, KJV).

And in **Colossians 1:25-27**, Paul defines his own ministry in terms of this eternal purpose that God has:

“I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, *which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”

It’s really all about Christ, not about us. He is the glorious one. He is the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (**Colossians 2:3**). He is the one who is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (**Hebrews 1:3**). He is the one “who called us by his own glory and goodness” (**2 Peter 1:3; 1 Peter 5:10**) to “participate in the divine nature” (**2 Peter 1:4**). What is the Gospel for the Church? Simply put, it is:

God has planned to reveal his glory in and through the Church and to this end he is purifying us and transforming us “from glory to glory.”

In these “jars of clay” is the treasure of the glory of Christ (**2 Corinthians 4:7**). We are the lens through which the glory of God is revealed. It is through us that God “spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of [Christ]” (**2 Corinthians 3:15**). Through us, the knowledge of the glory of God will cover the whole

earth “as the waters cover the sea” (**Habakkuk 2:14**). That glory will be revealed and “all mankind together will see it” (**Isaiah 40:5**). “The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this” (**Isaiah 9:7**).

If there were a doxology that summarizes the Gospel for the Church, it would be **Ephesians 3:20-21**:

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

¹ George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Zondervan, 1998), p.23.

² George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Zondervan, 1998), p.23.

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