

God's Vision for the Church

By Dale V. Salico

- Part 1: God's Radiant Jewel-
- Part 2: Foundation Composition: 100% Grace
- Part 3: The Entrance to Christ's Church
- Part 4: Turning Priesthood Upside Down
- Part 5: Waging Peace
- Part 6: Stagnation, Addition or Multiplication?



Part 1: God's Radiant Jewel

[God's] 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. . . Ephesians 3:10

Ask the average person on the street, "What is the church?" and you will likely be told it is a building where church services, weddings and funerals are held. The average Christian may tell you that the church is the family of God, the body of Christ. That's nice, but it will not hold one's attention very long. Therefore, it comes as a shock to most people when they realize what Ephesians 3:10 actually means.

Suppose that the Angel Gabriel walks up to Jesus in heaven and says, "Hey, Jesus! What's your plan for planet earth? What are you producing down there?" Jesus' answer will be, "I'm not going to tell you, Gabe. If you want to know, watch my people, the church. Observe them carefully and you'll see."

Imagine someone placing in your left hand a plain brown rock about one inch in diameter, and in your right hand a cut diamond of the same size. To which will your eyes be drawn? Which will you turn slowly in your hand, holding it up to the light so you can study all its facets and depths? The glory of a diamond is its multi-faceted transparency, which refracts and reflects light into a kaleidoscope of color. Our eyes eagerly explore every angle and depth, dazzled by the gem's prismatic parade of color.

The Bible declares that the manifold [the Greek word means, (multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, multi-colored)] wisdom of God is revealed through the church. As a skillfully cut diamond displays the light of the sun in a dazzling array of colors, the church exhibits the multi-faceted wisdom of God. Two snapshots of the church in the book of Acts illustrates the multi-faceted splendor of the church immediately after Pentecost.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Acts 4:33-35

Gaze for a moment on this jewel of new humanity, created by the outpouring of the Spirit of God. They were committed to the Apostles' teaching, to deep relationships, observing the Lord's Table, inspired by miracles in their midst, sharing together until needs were wiped out, joyful, sincere, worshiping and praising God, bearing witness to their risen Lord, and growing in number every day.

No one sat down and strategically planned this dynamic community. It was the spontaneous creation of the Spirit of Christ-- unparalleled (although it was prophesied, in the Old Testament-- Ezekiel 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-32).

The result? Men and women were drawn to this radiant jewel of a church by the thousands! So great was their desire to be part of the community of the risen Christ, they would let nothing stand in their way. God's magnificent vision for His church had captured their minds and hearts, creating a movement that, to everyone's amazement, would reach the entire earth claiming adherents from every nation and people.

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THINK ABOUT IT:

Evaluate the quality of your church as a jewel on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high) in each of the following areas:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Study/knowledge of Word of God | _____ |
| Deep, committed relationships | _____ |
| Observance of the Lord's Table | _____ |
| Miracles | _____ |
| Sharing to meet each other's needs | _____ |
| Joy | _____ |
| Sincerity | _____ |
| Fervent, heartfelt worship | _____ |
| Sharing Christ with unbelievers | _____ |
| Growing in numbers | _____ |
| Overall rating as a jewel for Christ | _____ (average of above) |

Ask the Lord which facet of the jewel of your congregational life needs polishing in the next twelve months, so that the angels can see His will more clearly through your church.

Part 2: Foundation Composition: 100% Grace

"Pastor, I want you to know I really enjoyed your church on Sunday, but I'm not coming back." Instead of saying, "Huh?" I managed a somewhat more sensible, "Would you help me understand what you mean?"

"Well, it's really simple," responded this first-time visitor. "I looked at everyone in the service and they all have their lives together. My life is a mess. I just don't fit in." As we talked, this visitor explained to me what was so messy was about her life.

"Would you come back just one more Sunday so I can introduce you to someone?" I asked. She consented. The next Sunday I introduced her to a member whose background was very much like her own, and whose life might be described as "Under Construction, but Not Together Yet." On Tuesday our visitor called me. "Thanks for introducing me to Jean. She is really a neat lady. If that's what Christians are like, I'll fit in better than I thought!" Eventually, this young woman was baptized as a new follower of Christ and developed a ministry for people who feared they might not fit in.

Countless people have an incorrect perception both of Christianity and the church.

American pop culture puts the church in a "no-win position." Believing that heaven is for "good people" (loosely enough defined to include most people), pop culture then concludes that churches must be full of "good people" (meaning people who say they are good enough to have earned heaven). When church members are found to be sinners, pop culture shouts, "You're pretending to be better than us (by being church members), but you aren't! Hypocrites! That's why we don't go to church!" (implying that not going to church makes one more honest, and therefore, a better person than church attenders.)

The most important passage of Scripture that people in our culture (both Christian and non-Christian) need to understand about Christianity and about the Church is Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV):

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast.

The foundation of the church is not the goodness of its members; it is 100% grace-God's incomparable gift of complete forgiveness and eternal life, free for the taking. The Bible makes it crystal clear that we have nothing to offer God with which we could purchase eternal life (Isaiah 64:6). Because He loved us, God therefore paid for our salvation with the perfect life of His Son, Jesus Christ.

...it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. I Peter 1:18-19 (NIV)

Salvation is free for us because the Son of God sacrificed Himself for it, and gives it without cost to all who believe! The church is therefore created and built on the foundation of God's grace.

If grace is the foundation of the church, grace must also define the nature of the church. Created by grace, the body of Christ is to give grace, both to those without and those within.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. - II Corinthians 5:18-19 (NIV)

The church is anything but a "good-enough-guy-or-gal club." As a community built on grace we must make it clear to those outside the church that there has never been nor will there ever be a Christian who is good enough on his or her own merit to reach heaven. The church is a fellowship of forgiven failures who have turned their lives over to Jesus Christ for redesign and restoration. God requires just three things of people to become part of this body:

- 1) be truly sorry for one's sin,
- 2) believe in God's Son, Jesus Christ, and
- 3) be willing for God's Spirit to change them so they become more like Christ.

Within the church, being a grace giving community means that Christians see themselves as people traveling together toward a life worthy of Christ's love for them. This requires a correct understanding of ourselves and a "grace-full" compassion toward others.

...I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. - Ephesians 4:1-2 (NIV)

The proper posture for a Christian who encounters a fallen brother or sister is not finger wagging, but stooping to lift and embrace. The glory of giving grace to our brothers and sisters is the reassurance that we will receive grace in return, when we find ourselves sprawled flat on our faces, foot snared in one of the Tempter's traps.

A community of grace is a place sufficiently safe for people to become real and begin to grow, exercising trust in one's brothers and sisters, learning together what it means to follow the Lord. When outsiders see Christians living and loving like this, they will draw closer, look longer, and ask how they can enter such grace.

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THINK ABOUT IT

1. If someone said to you, "I don't go to church because the church is full of hypocrites," what would you say?
2. Imagine a person toward whom it would be really hard for you to extend grace. What is it about that person that aggravates you? What action could you take to show grace toward that individual?

Part 3: The Entrance to Christ's Church

More than any other part of a building, church entrances communicate powerful messages to newcomers. As churches engaged in mission within a culture that is hostile toward the gospel, the entrances to the buildings where we meet must be obvious, attractive and inviting, as if proclaiming, "You are most welcome here!"

If this is true for the buildings in which Christians meet, is it not also true for the spiritual body of Christ? The entrance to the spiritual body of Christ must be obvious, attractive and proclaim, "All who enter into Christ become new creations: fresh, clean and overflowing with life that comes from God."

In the New Testament, the entrance to the body of Christ was clear and compelling to those who came to faith, being designed by none other than Christ Himself.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... Matthew 28:19

The disciples understood Jesus to mean that all who follow Christ should signify their discipleship through baptism.

The people...said to Peter and the other apostles, Brothers, what shall we do? Peter replied, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit... Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. Acts 2:37-41

The pattern of faith/repentance, followed by baptism, is repeated eight additional times in the book of Acts. So consistent was this pattern in the early church that Paul spoke of being baptized into Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27) or baptized into Christ's body (I Corinthians 12:13).

In the early church Christ Himself was the door to salvation, and baptism the entry room through which new believers entered the body of Christ, the church. Those who are baptized should first come to understand its profound meaning. First, by symbolically following Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection, new believers proclaim that these historical events took place for them and that salvation comes from their identification with what Jesus has already done.

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. Romans 6:4

Beyond this, believers' baptism proclaims that while salvation is something we receive and is in that sense passive (Ephesians 2:8-9), discipleship, from the very start, is active. By an act of my will I obey Christ's command to be baptized, and by so doing, proclaim Him to be Lord of my life!

Being immersed in water also portrays the forgiveness of our sins.

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on His name. Acts 22:16

Furthermore, the association of baptism in water (mentioned 68 times in the New Testament) with baptism in or by the Holy Spirit (6 times in the NT), conveys the image of the believer being plunged into the Holy Spirit, a picture very close to one portrayed by Christ:

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. John 7:37-39

Baptism dramatically portrays the transformation from detached belief to life-changing faith. In the water of baptism, God, through His servant, calls an individual by name, as if he or she were the only person in the world, affirming that redemption with all its rich meaning now belongs to this man or woman. At the same time, the new believer, before the Lord and the community of faith, is responding, "Yes, all this is mine through the One who died and rose again for me!"

In thirty years of pastoral ministry, I found nothing more effectively drew seekers to Christ than the testimony of new believers at their baptism. This symbolic entrance to the body of Christ, selected by the Lord Himself, explained in His Word, and illumined by the Holy Spirit, powerfully conveys the possibility of new birth for all who believe. A church that gives baptism its biblical place as the public entrance into Christ's body, will also be a church with a steady flow of people coming to faith in Christ and progressing into mature discipleship.

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Think about it...

1. The word "baptism," in all its forms, is used 74 times in the New Testament, including all four gospels (33 times), the book of Acts (24 times), and six epistles (17 times). Is believers' baptism as prominent in your church as it is in the New Testament?
2. How can your church most faithfully follow the teaching and example of the New Testament regarding baptism?

Part 4: Turning Priesthood Upside Down

Jesus often turned language upside down in order to communicate God's values to a world living by its own values. For example, Jesus' command to love one's enemies is (by human standards) self-contradictory. A person one loves is by no means an enemy. The moment one begins loving the enemy, he or she ceases to be the enemy!

A similar overturning of human language is evident in the New Testament concept of "the priesthood of all believers."

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:5,9

By speaking of all Christians as a "priesthood," Peter overturned the definition of priesthood? individuals who have been set apart from others as mediators between God and humanity. If we are all priests, then no one any longer needs priests!

The environment in which "priests" are mentioned in the New Testament is overwhelmingly (90%) negative: a shadow that is fading away at best, or in outright opposition to what God is doing at worst. Of the 159 times the words "priest(s)" and "Priesthood" appear in the New Testament, 105 refer to the religious leadership of Israel that opposed Christ, brought about His death and attempted to silence His followers. The book of Hebrews contains 35 references to priests, all showing that the old order, being a shadow of what God would do through the Messiah, had been replaced by Christ, our ever-living High Priest. Strikingly, priests are never mentioned in Paul's epistles.

With this in mind the five positive references to believers as "priests" in 1 Peter and Revelation (1:6; 5:10; 20:6) are all the more striking. In Christ's church, no distinct office of "priest" remains because all Christians are priests.

1. All have received the anointing of God's Spirit (Acts 2:4, 16-18, 38- 39).
2. Every believer has direct access to God (1 Timothy 2:5).
3. All offer sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2).
4. All are involved in proclamation (II Corinthians 3:3).
5. All minister one to another (I Corinthians 12:4-7, 17-18, 25-26).

Baptist theologian, Frank Staggs observes:

" . . .each Christian is a 'layman' and a 'minister.' Each is a minister in the sense that each is called to a life of service. Each is a layman in that there is no 'priestly' group distinguished from the people. . . All are priests in that each has direct access to God for himself and each has a 'priestly' service to render in behalf of his brethren. Thus, all Christians stand on common ground, and all participate in the continuing ministry of the living Lord as His body, the church." New Testament Theology, p. 253

The reality of "priesthood of all believers" makes the church the most liberating community in history. The man or woman on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder and living in the most remote place on earth, through Jesus Christ, has direct access to the greatest Power in the universe. The president has no perk denied the pauper; the CEO no inside connection unavailable to custodian. All, having obtained peace with God through the same cross, approach Him through the same great High Priest and Mediator, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the Holy Spirit says,

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not

many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong . . . so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." I Corinthians 1:26-31

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THINK ABOUT IT . . .

1. According to the New Testament, are there any prerogatives or rights reserved for the clergy, but denied to other Christians?
2. In what ways should pastors affirm the "priesthood of all believers" in our churches?
3. The priesthood of all believers describes not just one's rights, but also one's responsibilities. What are those responsibilities?

Part 5: Waging Peace

According to the New Testament, the expression "church fight" is an oxymoron. In spite of this, most Christians say, "Church fight? Yeah, I sure know what that is! Let me tell you about one. . ." One story leads to another, each storyteller convinced his or her tale is more outlandish than all the rest.

Some Christians point to Acts, chapters 6 and 15 as the first church fights, concluding that church fights are normal and should be tolerated. I disagree. e conflicts in Acts 6 and 15 were not tolerated. They were resolved (see Acts 6:5-7 and 15:24-31). Today, most church fights either burn out of control or smolder, ready to erupt in a moment. Church fights are not normal. They are sinful. They hurt people. And they cause the Spirit of God to withhold His anointing from our ministries.

Jesus understood that church fights pull the plug on effective evangelism. That is why, on the night before He died, the Lord lifted a petition for peace within His body no less than four times (John 17:11,21,22,23). Jesus viewed the unity of His Church as the indispensable evidence that He had been sent by the Father:

May they be brought into complete unity to let the world know that you sent me . . . John 17:23

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. John 13:34-35

The Apostle Paul considered church fights a symptom of spiritual immaturity, a humiliating spectacle before the world, bringing grief to the heart of God.

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual, but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. . . For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? I Corinthians 3:1,3

. . .do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,. . . Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4:30-32

God envisions a Church that will not tolerate fighting, committing itself instead to the hard work of living in a manner worthy of the gospel.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:1-3

The word translated "make every effort" describes intense, diligent, costly and continual effort, like a runner sprinting toward the finish line. If we are to live in a manner worthy of Christ, we must give peace within His body everything we have got. Why? Because in our fallen world quarreling comes effortlessly, while unity is elusive. In prison at the time, Paul used prison language to make his point. Once we attain unity, we must "keep (literally, stand guard over) it." How? "Through the bond (chain) of peace." As bonds kept prisoners from slipping away, so, once we achieve unity in the church, we must chain it down, guard it vigilantly, lest we lose it!

Dwight D. Eisenhower, who commanded the Allied troops in Europe during World War II, entitled the second volume of his White House memoirs *Waging Peace*. As president, Eisenhower said he learned that peace had to be as vigorously pursued as war if peace was to prevail.

Christians, and particularly church leaders, are called by the power of the Spirit, to wage peace. The stakes in this struggle are the highest. Without unity in the body of Christ we will lose the world. But if the gospel of peace is vindicated by a community that lives in peace, the gates of hell will fall before us.

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Think about it. . . .

1. How costly has conflict been in the life of your church-- in time, ministry, money and souls won for Christ?
2. How does your church teach people to resolve their differences?
3. What is the difference between "putting out fires" and "waging peace?" Which expression better describes your church?

Part 6: Stagnation, Addition or Multiplication?

I was barely twenty years old when I accepted a call as pastor to a tiny congregation outside Cuba, New York. I visited door-to-door inviting people to church. (They didn't come.) I led worship and Bible studies, preached, taught Sunday School and arranged special programs. I did everything except light the potbelly stove on Sunday morning. (Had they asked, I probably would have done that, too!) I believed the pastor, as servant of the Lord, should do any task that needed to be done. In return, the Lord would bless the pastor's faithfulness with fruit. When I left the church after two years it was the same as when I came. (Ministry style: Lone Ranger. Results: Stagnation.)

In the next twelve years, I learned to recruit and organize volunteers for ministry. By mobilizing the skills of willing people, significant ministry was accomplished. People found Christ as Savior and churches grew. I learned how to lead through strategic planning, implementation and evaluation. During this period, my approach to continuing education and personal growth was to identify my own "weakest link" and strengthen my skill in that area. (Ministry style: Management. Results: Addition.)

It is hard for me to believe now that I had been in ministry about fourteen years before the implications of the gifts of the Holy Spirit gripped my heart and revolutionized my approach to ministry.

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. . . There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. . . All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. I Corinthians 12:1, 4-7, 11

I finally realized that the church mobilizes not through people's natural talents, but through special "gifts" given by God's Spirit to all His people at the time they come to faith in Christ. A spiritual gift is a significant ability given by the Spirit of God to each believer, equipping him or her to serve in special ways within the body of Christ in order to accomplish God's purpose in the world. Helping people to discover and use the gifts the Holy Spirit had given them became one of my greatest joys in ministry. Instead of trying to strengthen my own "weakest links," I looked for a brother or sister who was gifted in my "weakest links" and formed potent partnerships. I rejoiced in my weaknesses, because they drew me closer to wonderful people God had brought into my life. Joy and effectiveness soared in the church as we discovered God's method for mission mobilization. (Ministry style: Spiritual Gift Discovery. Results: Multiplication.)

A lonely fiddler can turn out a spunky tune. But an orchestra can achieve magnificence. So it is in Christ's church. Coming together as a multitude of diverse instruments under the leadership of the Master Director of the universe, the Church is capable of filling the world with the harmonies of heaven.

The world has rarely seen the church live up to its full potential. I pray to God that the American Baptist Churches of the Pacific Southwest will give the world such an opportunity.

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Think About It . . .

1. How do people become involved in ministries in your church?
 - a) Reluctantly
 - b) Because of loyalty
 - c) According to their natural talents
 - d) Through their spiritual gifts
2. Is your ministry style more like the Lone Ranger, a manager, or a guide to spiritual gift discovery?
3. Do your weaknesses lead you and the church toward fruitless frustration or potent partnerships?