

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 3: THE MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

What Identifies a Genuine Assembly of Christ's People

Lesson 9

THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE CHURCH

Against the Parachurch Temptation — Why the Local Church Is God's Plan A

Christ has not left His church waiting for a better plan. He has given her everything she needs — the Word, the Spirit, the offices, the ordinances, and the gifts and He is not supplementing that provision with anything else.

“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

Ephesians 4:11–12, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 3:10, 21; 4:11–16; Hebrews 10:24–25; 1 Timothy 3:15

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

There is a peculiar paradox at work in contemporary Western Christianity. It is possible, and indeed increasingly common, to be deeply invested in the kingdom of God, seriously committed to theological formation, passionately engaged with Christian mission, and genuinely devoted to Jesus Christ, while maintaining only a marginal, consumer-level relationship to any particular local congregation. A person in this condition listens to sermons from a dozen different preachers online, reads theology from scholars in multiple traditions, volunteers with two or three parachurch organizations, attends a weekly small group that is not organically connected to any church, and regards formal membership in a local congregation as an optional institutional formality that adds bureaucratic complexity to an otherwise vibrant spiritual life. This person is not hostile to the church; they simply do not believe it is necessary. They believe they are doing the work of the kingdom more effectively outside its institutional forms than within them.

This lesson is a direct and pastoral challenge to that conviction. The argument is straightforward: the local church is not a supplement to the Christian life or a vehicle for the delivery of religious services that might be supplied more efficiently by other means. She is God's appointed instrument for every essential function of the Christian life, worship, preaching, the ordinances, discipleship, mutual accountability, pastoral care, mission sending, and mercy ministry. She is sufficient for these tasks not because she is particularly efficient or organizationally impressive, but because Christ has equipped her with everything she needs to accomplish everything He has called her to do: the Word, the Spirit, the offices, the ordinances, and the gifts. The parachurch organization, however valuable in its legitimate supplementary role, is not a substitute for the local church, and the believer who invests primary loyalty and energy in the parachurch at the expense of the local church has misread both the New Testament's ecclesiology and the nature of the Christian life.

The rise of the parachurch in the twentieth century is not entirely attributable to the church's failure. Some parachurch organizations exist because they address specific needs that no single local congregation can address alone, needs for theological education, for specialized missionary training, for mercy ministry at a scale that requires institutional infrastructure. These are legitimate contributions, and a fair engagement with the parachurch question must acknowledge them honestly. But the parachurch phenomenon in its dominant contemporary form is inseparable from the weakening of the local church, a weakening that is both cause and effect of the parachurch's growth. When local churches fail to preach the Word faithfully, believers seek it elsewhere. When local churches fail to invest in genuine discipleship, believers find parachurch discipleship programs. When local churches fail to mobilize their members for mission, mission-minded believers route around the church and support parachurch mission agencies directly. The parachurch often fills vacuums that the local church has created by neglecting its own calling.

This lesson engages the parachurch question with both conviction and nuance. The conviction: the local church is sufficient for the purposes God has appointed her, and no believer's spiritual formation or missional engagement is complete outside of committed, covenantal, accountable membership in a specific local congregation. The nuance: this conviction does not require the demonization of every parachurch organization or the denial of the genuine contributions that some para-church ministries have made to the kingdom of God. It does require a clear understanding of the proper relationship between the parachurch and the church, a recognition that the

parachurch is always at its best when it serves the church rather than replacing her, and a pastoral call to every believer to make the local church the primary community of his or her covenant life.

I. THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Christ Has Given Her Everything She Needs

A. *The Five Provisions of Christ for His Church*

The sufficiency of the local church is grounded in the sufficiency of Christ's provision for her. He has not established the church and then left her to improvise the resources she needs for her mission; He has equipped her with everything that the New Testament identifies as essential to the accomplishment of that mission. Five provisions constitute this equipment: the Word, the Spirit, the offices, the ordinances, and the gifts. Together these five provisions constitute a complete and sufficient instrument for every task that Christ has assigned to the church, from the initial proclamation of the gospel to the final formation of the believer in the fullness of Christlikeness.

The first provision is the Word of God: The Holy Scriptures in their entirety, received as the inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient revelation of the living God. Paul's declaration to Timothy captures both the source and the scope of the Word's sufficiency: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). The Word is sufficient to equip the man of God, and by extension the congregation of God, for every good work. It does not require supplementation by parachurch curricula, celebrity-pastor podcasts, or therapeutic self-help resources. It requires faithful proclamation, careful study, patient application, and the Spirit's illumination in the gathered community of the covenant. The church that has the Word has the most powerful instrument of transformation in the universe; the church that supplements the Word with human alternatives because she finds the Word's ministry insufficient has misidentified her own most fundamental resource.

The second provision is the Holy Spirit: the same Spirit who inspired the apostolic deposit, who regenerated the members of the congregation, who distributes gifts to each one for the common good, who intercedes for the saints, who produces the fruit of holiness in the lives of God's people, and who is present wherever two or three gather in the name of Christ (Matthew 18:20). The Spirit is not a supplementary resource that the local church accesses through special programs or extraordinary experiences; He is the constitutive presence of the church, the one who makes the community what it is, who animates the preached Word with divine power, who opens the hearts of those who hear, who sustains the fellowship of genuine covenant community, and who will accomplish in every member what no human program or institutional arrangement can produce. The church that has the Spirit has the power of the age to come present in her midst; the church that looks beyond herself for spiritual power has forgotten who dwells within her.

B. *Offices, Ordinances, and Gifts as Christ's Ongoing Provision*

The third provision is the offices: the appointed leadership structure of elders (overseers) and deacons that Christ has given the church through the apostolic instruction preserved in Scripture. Ephesians 4:11–12 identifies the gifted leaders Christ has given to His body, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, and names their purpose: "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." The pastoral office is Christ's own gift to the church for the purpose of her building up. The elder who preaches faithfully, shepherds pastorally, guards the doctrine jealously, and equips the members for ministry is exercising

the office that Christ instituted and through which He continues to provide for His church's growth and health. No parachurch organization can substitute for this office, because no parachurch organization has the covenantal authority, the pastoral accountability, and the Spirit-given commission that the elder exercises in the gathered assembly.

The fourth provision is the ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper, the visible words of the gospel that Christ appointed as the church's enacted proclamation of His death and resurrection. The ordinances are not available to the individual believer apart from the local church; they are by definition communal, covenant acts that presuppose the gathered assembly and its leadership. No online streaming service can baptize; no parachurch organization can administer the Lord's Supper with the covenant authority that the local church exercises. The ordinances bind the believer to the local assembly in a way that is uniquely ecclesiological, because they are the church's enacted proclamation, visible words that can only be spoken by the community in covenant assembly. The fifth provision is the gifts: the spiritual endowments that the Spirit distributes to each member of the congregation "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Every member of the local church has been given a gift for the building up of the body, and those gifts find their God-appointed context of exercise in the local congregation. The believer who is not committed to a local congregation is a believer who is not exercising his gifts in the context for which they were given.

The sufficiency of these five provisions means that the local church, when she is faithful to what Christ has given her, has everything she needs to do everything Christ has called her to do. She does not need to outsource discipleship to a parachurch organization because she has the Word, the Spirit, the pastoral office, and the gifts for that work. She does not need to outsource evangelism because she has the gospel, the Spirit's power, and the relational presence of her members in the community. She does not need to outsource missions because she has the Great Commission, the Spirit's sending, and the covenantal structure for commissioning, supporting, and holding accountable those she sends. The church's sufficiency is not an argument for institutional self-satisfaction; it is an argument for the church's responsibility. If the church has been given everything she needs, then the failure of any of these functions is not a resource problem; it is a faithfulness problem.

II. THE RISE OF THE PARACHURCH

A Phenomenon the New Testament Does Not Know

A. What the Parachurch Is and How It Arose

The term "parachurch" describes organizations that pursue Christian ministry goals, evangelism, discipleship, theological education, mercy ministry, missions, campus outreach, publishing, broadcasting, alongside the local church but outside its formal structure, accountability, and covenantal authority. The prefix "para-" (Greek for "beside" or "alongside") accurately describes the intended relationship: the parachurch is meant to work alongside the local church, serving and supplementing her ministry rather than replacing it. Organizations like campus ministries, mission agencies, seminary institutions, theological publishers, and mercy ministry organizations are familiar contemporary examples of the parachurch model at its best, each addressing a specific need that benefits from specialized institutional focus and cross-congregational scale.

The contemporary parachurch phenomenon, however, is not primarily the product of a deliberate ecclesiological decision to establish supplementary organizations alongside the local church. It is, in large part, the product of the local church's failure to fulfill her own calling. When churches stopped catechizing their young people, campus ministry organizations arose to fill the gap. When churches lost the theological substance necessary to train pastors, seminaries arose to provide the theological formation that local congregations could no longer supply. When churches retreated from missions into institutional maintenance, mission agencies arose to mobilize and deploy the mission-minded believers whom the local church had failed to send. When churches neglected mercy ministry, Christian relief and development organizations arose to do what the assembled congregation was no longer doing. The parachurch is, in many of its most significant expressions, a monument to the local church's failure, and the evangelical world's response to that failure has been, too often, to celebrate the parachurch's compensation rather than to call the church back to her own responsibility.

The New Testament knows nothing of a parachurch structure. Every function that contemporary parachurch organizations perform, evangelism, discipleship, theological education, mercy ministry, missions sending, cross-cultural outreach, is performed in the New Testament by the local church under the oversight of her elders. The church at Antioch does not commission Barnabas and Saul to a mission agency for training and deployment; she prays for them, fasts over them, lays hands on them, and sends them in the name of the congregation (Acts 13:2–3). When Paul establishes new congregations in the course of his missionary journeys, he appoints elders in every church (Acts 14:23) because the local church, with its appointed leadership and covenant community, is the intended form of the gospel's presence in every new community. The New Testament's consistent pattern is that the functions now distributed across dozens of parachurch organizations were always intended to be exercised by the local congregation under elder leadership, and the recovery of that pattern is the fundamental challenge that the contemporary parachurch phenomenon poses to the church.

B. The Displacement of the Local Church

The most serious problem with the contemporary parachurch phenomenon is not the existence of supplementary organizations alongside the local church but the displacement of the local church by those organizations in the loyalty, energy, and resources of individual believers. When a believer's primary spiritual community is a parachurch small group rather than a local congregation; when his primary theological formation comes from online content creators rather than his pastor's preaching; when her most significant financial giving goes to a mission agency rather than to the local church that could be sending its own missionaries; when his most meaningful service investment is in a parachurch organization rather than in the ministries of his own congregation, the parachurch has ceased to supplement the local church and has begun to replace her. This displacement is the defining spiritual danger of the contemporary parachurch movement, and it is experienced not as a departure from the faith but as an intensification of it.

The displacement of the local church is particularly dangerous because it typically occurs among the most spiritually serious and ministry-motivated members of the congregation, exactly the people whose gifts and energy the church most needs. The young person who volunteers forty hours a month with a parachurch campus ministry but cannot be persuaded to teach a Sunday school class; the businessman who gives generously to a parachurch mission agency but withholds meaningful financial support from his local church; the seminary student who devours theological content from online sources but barely engages with the preaching in the congregation he nominally attends, all of these represent the parachurch's consumption of exactly the resources that the local

church needs to fulfill its calling. The result is a local church that is impoverished by the departure of its most gifted members' best energy, and a parachurch ecosystem that is enriched by resources that were always intended for the covenant community.

The theological mechanism behind this displacement is the separation of spiritual investment from covenantal accountability. The parachurch allows a believer to pursue Christian ministry without the obligations, complications, and costs of genuine covenant community. She can give to a mission agency without knowing the missionaries personally, without being known by them, and without any mutual accountability for the quality of the partnership. He can attend a theological conference without being formed by the sustained, weekly, patient engagement with the whole counsel of God that a faithful pastor's preaching over years provides. She can serve in a parachurch organization without the accountability that elder oversight provides. The parachurch, at its most problematic, is the spiritual equivalent of the consumer model's church: it allows religious investment without covenantal commitment, ministry without accountability, and spiritual formation without the friction of genuine covenant community. And the friction of genuine covenant community is precisely what produces the Christlikeness that is the goal of the Christian life.

III. THE CHURCH'S FUNCTIONS AND THE PARACHURCH'S LIMITS

What Only the Local Church Can Do

A. Functions That Are Inherently Ecclesial

There are specific functions of the Christian community that are inherently ecclesial, that belong to the local church by nature and cannot be transferred to any other institution without fundamental distortion. The administration of the ordinances is the clearest example: only the local church, under the authority of her elders, can baptize new believers into the covenant community and administer the Lord's Supper as the community's enacted proclamation of the Lord's death. No parachurch organization has this authority, because this authority belongs to the covenant assembly, not to a voluntary association of individuals who share a ministry focus. The parachurch campus ministry that baptizes its converts without connecting them to a local church has not completed the Great Commission's mandate; it has performed the ordinance of entry into the covenant community without constituting the covenant community into which the new believer has been entered. The result is a baptized believer without a church, a theological contradiction that the New Testament nowhere envisions.

The exercise of church discipline is equally and even more exclusively ecclesial. The process of Matthew 18:15–20 culminates in “tell it to the church”, the gathered local assembly, not a parachurch accountability partner, not a small group leader, not a ministry supervisor. The binding and loosing authority that Christ grants in Matthew 18:18 belongs to the church, not to any voluntary para-ecclesial organization. The member whose conduct publicly contradicts his profession cannot be held accountable by a parachurch organization because the parachurch has no covenantal authority over him; it has only the informal authority of the relationship he has voluntarily entered. The covenant accountability that church membership provides, the authority to receive, to discipline, and if

necessary to exclude, is uniquely ecclesial and cannot be reproduced by any structure that lacks the church's covenantal character.

Pastoral oversight, the shepherding of specific souls by ordained elders who are accountable for those souls before God (Hebrews 13:17), is a third inherently ecclesial function. The parachurch organization may provide mentorship, counseling, accountability partnerships, and community. But it does not provide pastoral oversight in the New Testament sense, because its leaders are not ordained elders of a local congregation, are not accountable for the spiritual welfare of a defined community of covenanted members, and do not exercise the authority that the elder office carries. The believer who substitutes a parachurch community for a local congregation has exchanged pastoral oversight for spiritual peer support, and while peer support is genuinely valuable, it is not a substitute for the covenantal accountability that the elder's office provides.

B. What the Parachurch May Legitimately Do

Having established the inherently ecclesial functions that the parachurch cannot perform, it is important to acknowledge clearly what the parachurch may legitimately do in its proper supplementary role. Theological education is the clearest case: the seminary that trains pastors, the theological journal that advances doctrinal scholarship, and the confessional library that makes the great theological inheritance of the church accessible to ordinary pastors and members are all genuine contributions to the church's mission that are better accomplished by specialized institutions than by individual congregations operating in isolation. The local church benefits from the seminary's training, draws on the publisher's resources, and is served by the scholarly work that specialized institutions make possible. This is the parachurch at its most legitimate: an extension of the church's mission that serves the local church rather than competing with her.

Cross-cultural missions is a second area of legitimate parachurch contribution. The mission agency that provides specialized cross-cultural training, logistical support, member care, and field accountability for missionaries sent by local churches performs a genuine service that no single congregation can typically provide on its own. The key theological requirement is that the mission agency understands itself as the servant of the local church's missionary mandate, not its replacement. The missionary should be sent and financially supported by a local church that knows her, prays for her, holds her accountable, and receives her reports; the mission agency provides the specialized support that makes her ministry more effective, not the covenantal community that makes her ministry legitimate. When the mission agency becomes the missionary's primary covenantal community, her accountability structure, her financial supporter, her sending authority, the local church's missionary mandate has been effectively transferred to an institution that lacks the covenantal authority to fulfill it.

Mercy ministry at scale is a third legitimate parachurch function. The Christian homeless shelter, the pregnancy resource center, the international relief organization, and the neighborhood food pantry may all be legitimately organized as parachurch institutions precisely because the scale and specialization of their work benefits from institutional infrastructure that individual congregations cannot typically provide. Here again, the key requirement is that the parachurch mercy organization understands itself as serving the local church's calling to mercy ministry rather than substituting for it. The congregation that points needy people in its community entirely to parachurch mercy organizations, without any direct congregational engagement with those needs, has outsourced a function that belongs to it. The parachurch mercy organization should be amplifying the local church's mercy ministry, not replacing it.

IV. THE EQUIPPING OF THE SAINTS

Ephesians 4:11–16 and the Church's Sufficient Structure

A. *The Gifted Leaders as Christ's Provision*

Ephesians 4:11–16 is the New Testament's most comprehensive description of the church's sufficient structure for the accomplishment of her mission, and it is all the more striking for what it does and does not include. "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." The risen Christ's provision for the church's growth to full Christlike maturity consists entirely of gifted persons given to the body: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. There is no mention of parachurch organizations, institutional programs, specialized curricula, or supplementary ministries. The church grows to maturity through the ministry of gifted leaders who equip the saints for ministry.

The purpose of the gifted leaders in Ephesians 4:12 is to equip the saints for the work of service, not to do all the ministry themselves while the congregation watches, but to train, form, and equip every member to contribute his or her gifts to the body's common life and mission. This is the every-member-ministry model that the New Testament consistently envisions: a congregation in which the pastoral leaders are not the sole ministry professionals and the congregation is not a passive audience, but in which every member is a minister, equipped and deployed by the gifted leaders for the work of service. This model is antithetical to both the passive consumer church and the parachurch model, because both of them locate ministry primarily outside the covenant community, either in the performance of the professional pastoral team or in the programs of specialized organizations. Ephesians 4 locates ministry where the New Testament always locates it: in the equipped members of the body, exercising their gifts for the common good of the whole.

The trajectory of Ephesians 4:13–16 describes the goal toward which the church's sufficient structure is aiming: the attainment of unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, mature manhood, the fullness of Christ. This is not a modest goal. It is the comprehensive formation of the covenant community in the fullness of Christlike maturity, the eschatological vision of a body that has grown into the fullness of its Head. The claim embedded in this trajectory is that the local church, equipped by her gifted leaders and exercising every member's gifts for the common good, is sufficient to aim at and pursue this extraordinary goal. The Great Commission's mandate, to make disciples, teaching them to observe all that Christ commanded, is not a mission that requires a parachurch ecosystem to supplement the local church. It is a mission that the local church, faithful to her Christ-given provision, is fully equipped to pursue.

B. *The Body Building Itself Up in Love*

Ephesians 4:15–16 describes the mechanism of the church's growth: "but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." Two features of this description are directly relevant to the

parachurch question. First, the growth of the body comes from the body itself: “the whole body...causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself.” The church builds herself up through the proper working of each member in his or her appointed place. The church is not built up by external programs imposed on it or supplementary institutions attached to it; she is built up by the Spirit-energized ministry of her own members, each contributing the gift that the Head has given for exactly this purpose.

Second, the building up of the body happens “in love”, in the relational medium of genuine covenant community, where truth is spoken and received between people who know each other, who are committed to each other’s growth, and who are willing to bear the cost of genuine accountability. The “love” of Ephesians 4:15–16 is not the sentimental affection of people who have chosen to associate because they find each other congenial; it is the covenant love of people who are bound together by their shared union with Christ and their shared membership in His body, and who are committed to speaking the truth to one another even when truth-speaking is costly. This is the love that is only possible in the gathered covenant community, where people are known by name, where history is shared, where accountability is mutual, and where the long-term work of progressive sanctification takes place in the context of relationships that are deeper and more demanding than any parachurch organization can provide.

The practical implication of Ephesians 4:11–16 for the parachurch question is straightforward: the church does not need the parachurch to build herself up. She needs her gifted leaders to equip her members, and she needs her members to exercise their gifts for the common good of the whole body. What she needs from the broader Christian ecosystem is not supplementary programs that replace the ministry of her own members, but specialized resources and institutions that serve her ability to do what she has been equipped to do. The distinction is subtle but crucial: the parachurch that serves the local church’s equipping is a legitimate supplement; the parachurch that replaces the local church’s ministry has exceeded its mandate and begun to undermine the very community it purports to serve.

V. THE DANGERS OF PARACHURCH DEPENDENCE

What Is Lost When the Church Outsources Her Mission

A. The Loss of Covenantal Accountability

When believers route their primary spiritual investment through parachurch organizations rather than through the local church, the first casualty is covenantal accountability, the mutual obligation of members to one another and to the leaders who will give an account for their souls (Hebrews 13:17). The parachurch relationship is, by its very nature, voluntary and exit-capable: a person can leave a parachurch organization at any time without the kind of covenantal complications that genuine church membership involves. This exit-capability is not a feature of the parachurch’s design but a consequence of its non-covenantal structure. And it produces a form of Christian community in which the most demanding aspects of covenant life, the accountability, the discipline, the authority structure, the mutual bearing of burdens that requires long-term commitment to be effective, are systematically absent.

The loss of covenantal accountability has direct consequences for spiritual formation. The research literature on spiritual growth consistently identifies two factors as most significantly associated with genuine, measurable

growth in Christlikeness: regular engagement with the Word through preaching and personal study, and deep, accountable relationships with other believers within a committed community. Both of these factors are most reliably provided by committed membership in a faithful local church. The parachurch can provide a form of community, but it cannot provide the depth of covenantal accountability that comes from membership in a gathered assembly that knows you by name, prays for you by name, bears your burdens by name, and is committed to your growth regardless of whether the relationship remains convenient. The spiritual freelancer who relates to the church as a resource to be consumed when useful and bypassed when inconvenient is systematically depriving himself of the primary means through which the Spirit forms Christlikeness in the people of God.

The pastoral implications of this accountability gap are considerable. The elder board of a local congregation can identify a member who is drifting, address the drift with pastoral care, and pursue the member through the process of Matthew 18 if the drift becomes a public departure from covenant faithfulness. The campus ministry director, the mission agency representative, and the small group leader cannot do any of these things, because they do not have the covenantal authority or the institutional structure to pursue a member with the kind of graduated, persistent, loving accountability that the pastoral office exercises. The believer who structures his or her primary spiritual community around parachurch organizations has, in effect, opted out of the covenantal accountability structure that Christ established for exactly the purpose of producing the kind of long-term, deep-rooted, accountable discipleship that the Great Commission's mandate requires.

B. The Weakening of the Local Church

Beyond its effects on individual believers, parachurch dependence has a systemic effect on the local church that is both well-documented and deeply concerning. When the most gifted, most energetic, and most ministry-motivated members of a congregation invest their primary time, money, and passion in parachurch organizations, the local church is systematically depleted of exactly the resources she needs to fulfill her own calling. The Sunday school goes untaught because the most capable teachers are pouring their energy into parachurch discipleship programs. The missions budget stagnates because the most generous givers are routing their mission-giving to para-church agencies. The congregation's care for the poor diminishes because the most compassionate members are serving at parachurch mercy organizations. The result is a local church that is institutionally present but spiritually anemic, a community that maintains its organizational existence but lacks the vitality, the gifts, and the resources to do what Christ has called it to do.

The weakening of the local church by parachurch dependence is compounded by the theological message that parachurch primacy sends to the broader congregation. When visibly committed Christians, those who are most passionate about the gospel, most serious about discipleship, most invested in mission, are primarily identified with parachurch organizations rather than with their local congregation, they communicate to the rest of the congregation that the local church is not where the real action is. The implicit message is that genuine, serious, engaged Christianity happens in the parachurch ecosystem, while the local church is for the spiritually ordinary and institutionally comfortable. This message, even when it is entirely unintentional, reinforces exactly the consumer ecclesiology that this series has consistently challenged: the assumption that the local church is a venue for the delivery of religious services rather than the covenant community in which the Christian life in its fullest expression is meant to take place.

The parachurch's weakening effect on the local church also extends to the church's financial health. Many parachurch organizations operate on fundraising models that compete directly with the local church for the charitable giving of individual believers. When a parachurch ministry can present a compelling case for its ministry impact, measurable outcomes, vivid stories, global reach, alongside a local church that can offer only the quieter and less measurable work of faithful preaching, pastoral care, and covenant community formation, the parachurch often wins the competition for donor dollars. The result is local churches chronically under-resourced for their own pastoral and missional work while parachurch organizations grow in institutional scale and influence. The believer who gives primarily to parachurch organizations on the grounds that they are more effective stewards of ministry resources has accepted a measurement framework that values programmatic efficiency over covenantal faithfulness, and has inadvertently contributed to the systemic weakening of the institution Christ has appointed as His primary instrument in the world.

VI. THE PROPER RELATIONSHIP

The Parachurch in Service of the Church

A. The Servant Model

The proper relationship between the parachurch and the local church is not competition or replacement but service. The parachurch, at its best, is the local church's specialist, the institution that focuses the resources and expertise of multiple congregations on specific tasks that benefit from scale and specialization while remaining oriented toward the strengthening and multiplication of local churches. The seminary exists to train pastors for local churches, not to create a class of theological professionals whose primary community is the academy. The mission agency exists to support and extend the missionary work of sending churches, not to become an alternative form of the church in the field. The mercy organization exists to amplify the local church's ministry to the poor, not to substitute for the congregation's direct engagement with its own community's needs.

When the parachurch maintains this servant orientation, the relationship between the local church and the parachurch organization is genuinely synergistic: the local church sends, supports, and holds accountable; the parachurch organization provides specialized training, logistical support, and institutional resources; the missionary, the pastor, or the mercy worker benefits from both; and the kingdom of God advances through the coordinated labor of institutions that each understand their proper function and limits. This is the parachurch at its best, and it is worth celebrating and supporting. The problem is not the parachurch's existence but its tendency, under the pressures of institutional growth and donor-driven mission drift, to expand its self-understanding from servant of the church to substitute for the church. Every parachurch organization must resist that tendency by regularly asking: are we strengthening local churches or weakening them? Are we sending people deeper into covenant community or routing them around it?

The local church's responsibility in the proper relationship is not to refuse all partnership with parachurch organizations but to maintain the primacy of her own calling and the integrity of her own covenantal life. The church that partners with a seminary for pastoral training, a mission agency for missionary support, and a mercy organization for amplified community engagement is not outsourcing her mission; she is leveraging specialized resources in service of her own ministry. The key is that the partnership remains a partnership, that the local

church retains the initiative, the accountability, and the covenantal authority, while the parachurch provides the specialized support. The congregation whose elders are actively involved in selecting which organizations receive her partnership, which missionaries receive her support, and which theological resources are commended to her members is a congregation that is using the parachurch ecosystem appropriately, in service of the local church's sufficient calling rather than as a replacement for it.

B. The Call to Committed, Covenantal Membership

The antidote to parachurch dependence at the individual level is committed, covenantal, accountable membership in a specific local congregation. The New Testament does not envision a category of genuine Christian discipleship that is not also genuinely and specifically churchly, connected to the covenant community through baptism, the Lord's Supper, elder oversight, mutual accountability, and the exercise of gifts for the common good. The command of Hebrews 10:24–25, “let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near”, is addressed to people with a specific “own assembling”, a particular community of which they are genuine members, whose regular gathering they must not abandon. The writer does not say “tune in to some Christian content online” or “participate in a parachurch community.” He says not to forsake “our own assembling.” Covenant membership in a specific local church is not an optional enhancement of the Christian life; it is the normal, expected, commanded expression of genuine Christian discipleship.

Committed membership means being known by name, giving consistently of time and money, serving in the congregation's actual ministries rather than only in external organizations, submitting to elder oversight, participating in the mutual accountability of covenant community, and staying through the difficulties rather than exiting when the relationship becomes uncomfortable or the leadership disappoints. It means understanding the local church not as a service provider whose quality determines the level of investment it deserves, but as a covenant community whose faithfulness to Christ determines the quality of commitment it warrants. The congregation that preaches the Word faithfully, administers the ordinances rightly, and pursues the holiness that the third mark requires deserves the committed membership of every believer who attends it, regardless of whether its programs are polished, its facilities are comfortable, or its cultural presentation is appealing.

The pastoral appeal that closes this lesson is simply this: the local church is imperfect. She is messy, sometimes frustrating, often slower than we would like, and occasionally disappointing in ways that are genuinely painful. But she is Christ's bride, and He has promised that the gates of Hades will not prevail against her (Matthew 16:18). She is the pillar and support of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). She is the theater in which God displays His manifold wisdom to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:10). She is the community for which Christ died, which He is building, and which He will present to Himself in glory without spot or wrinkle. To love her imperfect visible expression with the covenantal loyalty of committed membership is not institutional sentimentality; it is a form of participation in the love that Christ Himself has for the community He is preparing to be His bride. There is no Plan B. The local church is God's Plan A, and she is sufficient for everything He has called her to do.

VII. THE CHURCH AND HER PROMISE

The Gates of Hades Will Not Prevail

A. *Christ's Own Guarantee*

The most powerful argument for the church's sufficiency is not the organizational case that she has adequate resources, the historical case that she has survived for twenty centuries, or the sociological case that communities of committed members produce more effective ministry outcomes. The most powerful argument is the one Christ Himself makes in Matthew 16:18: "I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." Three claims are packed into this sentence. First, the church is Christ's: He possesses her, He values her, He identifies Himself with her. Second, He is building her: the church's growth and preservation are His active, ongoing project, not the product of human institutional management. Third, the gates of Hades will not prevail against her: whatever forces of death, darkness, error, and opposition she faces, institutional decline, cultural hostility, theological drift, internal failure, external persecution, none of them will be the final word. The promise is not that the church will never struggle or suffer; it is that she will not ultimately be overcome.

This promise is the bedrock of the church's sufficiency. She is not sufficient because she is organizationally impressive or institutionally stable. She is sufficient because the one who builds her has promised that no force in earth or hell will ultimately prevail against her. The small congregation in a declining community, the faithful remnant in a hostile culture, the church that has lost half its members to church-shopping or disillusionment, each of these can hold to Christ's promise and press forward in the confidence that the Builder's guarantee is not conditioned on the congregation's current circumstances. The pastor who preaches faithfully to a shrinking congregation, the elder who practices discipline in a church that would rather be comfortable, the member who commits to a messy and imperfect assembly instead of curating a more satisfying personal spiritual portfolio, each of these is trusting the Builder's promise in exactly the way He designed the church to be trusted.

The promise of Matthew 16:18 is also the final answer to the parachurch temptation. The parachurch temptation is, at its deepest level, a failure of faith in the promise. It says: the church as Christ has constituted her is not sufficient; she needs to be supplemented, augmented, or effectively replaced by more efficient instruments. But the Builder says otherwise. He says He is building the church. He says the gates of Hades will not prevail. He does not say this about any parachurch organization, any mission agency, any seminary, any theological publishing house, or any Christian media platform. He says it about the church, the gathered covenant community of the redeemed, meeting in His name, administering the ordinances He appointed, preaching the Word He gave, under the elders He ordained. That is the community He is building. That is the community whose gates of Hades will not prevail.

B. *The Doxological Horizon, Ephesians 3:21*

Paul closes the great prayer of Ephesians 3 with a benediction that gives the church's sufficiency its ultimate theological grounding: "to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:21). The church is the theater of God's glory: not one theater among several, not the primary but not exclusive venue for the display of His wisdom and power, but the appointed community through which the eternal God is displaying His manifold wisdom to the watching universe until the end of the age. This

doxological calling is not shared with the parachurch, not divided among the institutions of the Christian ecosystem, not distributed across the various platforms and organizations through which Christian ministry is conducted. It belongs to the church, to the gathered, baptized, Lord's-Supper-celebrating, elder-led, disciplined covenant community of Jesus Christ.

The glory that belongs to God in the church is displayed precisely through the ordinary, unremarkable, sometimes frustrating activities of the church's life together: the faithful preaching of the Word to the same congregation week after week, the careful admission of new members through the examination of their faith, the administration of baptism as the new covenant sign, the gathering of the covenant community around the Table, the exercise of discipline when a member's conduct contradicts the gospel, the bearing of one another's burdens in the unglamorous work of daily covenant life. None of these activities produces the kind of compelling institutional narrative that parachurch organizations can generate with their metrics of reach, conversions, and impact. But they are the activities in which God has chosen to display His glory, and the congregation that is faithful in them is participating in the most important work that is happening anywhere in the universe.

Paul's benediction also has an eschatological horizon that the parachurch cannot share: "to all generations forever and ever." The parachurch organization, however effective in its present ministry, is a temporal institution that will not exist in the new creation. The local church, the gathered covenant community of the redeemed, is the form of the eschatological community that will, in its final and glorified expression, constitute the New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, the eternal dwelling of God among His people. The congregation that understands this eschatological dignity will not be content to function as a secondary institution in a parachurch-dominated evangelical ecosystem. It will insist on its primacy, not out of institutional pride, but out of a theological conviction that the community Christ is building, the community whose gates of Hades will not prevail, the community in which God is glorified to all generations forever and ever, is the local church and nothing less. There is no Plan B. To God alone be the glory.

*"To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever.
Amen."*

Ephesians 3:21, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Sufficiency of the Church	The conviction that Christ has equipped the local church with everything she needs to accomplish the mission He has assigned her, the Word, the Spirit, the offices, the ordinances, and the gifts, without requiring supplementation by external institutions. Not a claim that every church is presently faithful or healthy, but that every church has been given adequate provision for every task Christ has called her to.
Parachurch	Organizations that pursue Christian ministry goals (evangelism, discipleship, theological education, mercy ministry, missions, campus outreach) alongside the local church but outside its formal structure, covenantal authority, and elder oversight. The prefix “para” (beside, alongside) indicates the intended relationship: supplementary service to the local church rather than replacement of it.
Covenantal Accountability	The mutual obligation of members within a local church to one another and to their appointed leaders, to be known, to be held accountable, to hold others accountable, and to be subject to the pastoral oversight of elders who will give an account for their souls (Hebrews 13:17). Uniquely available in the gathered covenant community; not reproducible by the voluntary, exit-capable relationships of parachurch organizations.
Every-Member Ministry	The New Testament’s model of congregational life in which every member has been given a spiritual gift for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7) and is expected to contribute that gift to the building up of the body (Ephesians 4:16). The pastoral office exists not to do all the ministry but to equip the saints for the work of service (Ephesians 4:12). The model is antithetical to both the passive consumer church and the parachurch substitution model.
Equipping	The primary function of the gifted leaders Christ gives to His body (Ephesians 4:11–12): the training, formation, and deployment of every member of the congregation for the work of service and the building up of the body. The pastor’s calling is not to do ministry for the congregation but to equip the congregation to do ministry together, so that the whole body builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:15–16).
Spiritual Freelancer	A colloquial designation for the believer who engages in Christian formation and ministry activities, consuming theological content, participating in parachurch programs, attending religious events, without committed, covenantal membership in a specific local congregation. Not a New Testament category; represents the consistent failure to fulfill the obligations that genuine church membership entails.
Mission Agency	A parachurch organization specializing in cross-cultural missionary work, recruitment, training, logistical support, member care, and field accountability for missionaries. Legitimate in its supplementary role when it serves and amplifies the missionary mandate of local churches rather than replacing the church as the sending and supporting community of missionaries.
Matthew 16:18	Christ’s promise to Peter: “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” The foundational guarantee of the church’s permanence and ultimately invincibility. The promise is not conditioned on the church’s institutional stability or cultural success but on Christ’s own commitment to building her. The most powerful argument for the church’s sufficiency is this promise, not any organizational or institutional argument.
Hebrews 10:24–25	The New Testament’s most direct command against forsaking the assembled community: “let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together.” The language of “our own assembling” presupposes committed

	membership in a specific local community whose regular gathering is a covenantal obligation, not a personal preference.
Ephesians 3:10, 21	Two verses from Paul's great prayer that define the church's cosmic significance: verse 10, the church is the instrument through which God's manifold wisdom is displayed to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places; verse 21, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Together they establish the church as the primary theater of God's glory, not one option among many.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the local church is God's Plan A for the Christian life and the Christian mission, and that there is no Plan B. This conviction is not institutional jingoism or denominational pride; it is a theological commitment grounded in Christ's own promise in Matthew 16:18, Paul's doxology in Ephesians 3:21, and the New Testament's consistent pattern of treating the local congregation as the primary and sufficient community for every essential function of the Christian life. The parachurch organization, at its best, serves this Plan A; it does not replace it.

We must believe that the church's sufficiency is not a claim about her current health or faithfulness but about the adequacy of Christ's provision for her. A congregation that is presently weak, poorly taught, or struggling to fulfill its calling has not been given insufficient resources; it has been unfaithful to sufficient resources. The prescription for a weak church is not to route around her with parachurch alternatives but to call her to faithfulness in the use of the Word, the Spirit, the offices, the ordinances, and the gifts that Christ has already given her. The church's sufficiency is the ground of her accountability, not an excuse for her complacency.

We must believe that committed, covenantal, accountable membership in a specific local congregation is not optional for genuine Christian discipleship. The New Testament does not envision a category of committed Christian life that is not also specifically and covenantally churchly. The command of Hebrews 10:24–25, not to forsake "our own assembling", is addressed to people with a specific local community to which they belong and from which they must not withdraw. Every believer who has received the gospel is called to be received into the covenant community through baptism, to submit to the oversight of elders, to exercise gifts for the common good, and to commit to the long, slow, sometimes frustrating work of building up the body in love.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a renewed love for the local church in all her ordinary, imperfect, sometimes frustrating particularity. The temptation is always to love the church in the abstract, the ideal, glorified, spotless bride of Christ, while being impatient with the actual congregation one belongs to. But Christ loves the actual congregation. He died for these specific, named, imperfect people. He is building this specific assembly. He will not abandon it. And the believer who allows his love for the ideal church to produce contempt for the actual church has misread the love of the Bridegroom, who gave Himself for her precisely in her spotted and wrinkled condition.

We should feel a holy impatience with the contemporary evangelical ecosystem's marginalization of the local church. The proliferation of parachurch celebrity culture, online theological communities, conference Christianity, and mission-agency branding that effectively positions the local church as a secondary institution in the kingdom enterprise is not a neutral development; it is a distortion of the New Testament's ecclesiology that has real and damaging consequences for real congregations and real members. This impatience should produce not cynicism but a renewed commitment to the local church as the primary community of the Christian life, and a renewed commitment to making the local church the kind of community that people want to commit to.

We should desire for this congregation to be known not for its institutional impressiveness but for its covenant faithfulness, for the quality of its preaching, the seriousness of its ordinances, the integrity of its discipline, the

depth of its fellowship, the warmth of its care for its members, and the clarity of its gospel witness to the surrounding community. This is the desire that flows from a genuine conviction about the sufficiency of the church: not the desire to build a large institution, but the desire to build a faithful community, a community that is worth the committed membership of every person who belongs to it, and that is worthy of the Builder's promise that the gates of Hades will not prevail against her.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Take an honest inventory of where you currently invest your primary spiritual energy, financial resources, and ministry time. Are you primarily investing in the local church, or are you primarily investing in parachurch organizations, online communities, or independent ministry activities? If the balance is significantly skewed toward the parachurch, identify one specific step you can take in the next month to reorient your primary investment toward this congregation.
- Read Ephesians 4:11–16 as a description of the church you are called to build together. Identify your spiritual gift, or if you are unsure, ask your pastor or an elder to help you identify it, and identify one specific way you can exercise that gift for the common good of this congregation this week. The every-member ministry model of Ephesians 4 requires your active participation, not only your passive attendance.
- Evaluate your giving. Is the local church receiving the first and the best of your financial stewardship, or is your giving to the local church a residual after other organizations have received your primary charitable investment? The New Testament's consistent pattern is that the local church is the first recipient of the congregation's financial resources, and that parachurch giving is secondary to that primary obligation. Bring your giving pattern into alignment with the ecclesiology this lesson has established.
- If you have been living as a spiritual freelancer, engaging in Christian formation and ministry activities without committed membership in a specific local congregation, this lesson is a call to address that gap. Speak with the pastor or an elder about the membership process, examine your understanding of the gospel and your readiness to commit to the covenant obligations of membership, and take the steps necessary to be formally received into this covenant community.
- Pray for the local church in your community: not only for this congregation but for the other genuine churches in your area whose pastors are faithfully preaching the Word, whose elders are diligently shepherding their flocks, and whose members are pressing forward in the imperfect, sometimes frustrating, always necessary work of building the body up in love. Pray for the weakest and most struggling of those congregations with particular earnestness, the ones that most need the prayer of their neighbors in the broader covenant community. The gates of Hades will not prevail against them either.

Key Texts: *Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 3:10, 21; 4:11–16; Hebrews 10:24–25; 1 Timothy 3:15*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before this lesson, where did you fall on the spectrum from full parachurch investment to full local church investment? Have you ever been in a season where parachurch activities or communities were more central to your spiritual life than your local congregation? What drove that season, and what brought you back (if you came back)?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Matthew 16:13–18. What question does Jesus ask in verse 13? What is Peter’s confession in verse 16? What does Jesus say He will do in verse 18 (“I will build My church”), and what promise does He attach to it? Who is the Builder? What does it mean that “the gates of Hades will not overpower it”, what are the gates of Hades, and what would prevailing against the church look like?
- Read Ephesians 4:11–16 carefully. What offices does Christ give to the body in verse 11? What is the stated purpose of these gifted leaders in verse 12? Who does “the work of service”, the leaders or the saints? What is the goal described in verse 13, and how does the description of verse 16 (“the whole body...causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love”) demonstrate that the church’s growth comes from within the body rather than from external supplement?
- Read Hebrews 10:23–25. What does the writer ground the exhortation in (verse 23: “For He who promised is faithful”)? What two activities does verse 24 call for? What specific behavior does verse 25 address, and what motivation does the writer give (“all the more as you see the day drawing near”)? What does the phrase “our own assembling” imply about the kind of relationship the writer envisions between the readers and their congregation?
- Read Ephesians 3:8–11 and 3:20–21. What is the specific role assigned to the church in verse 10? Who is the audience for this display? What is the doxological conclusion in verse 21, and how does the phrase “in the church” function in that conclusion? What does the phrase “to all generations forever and ever” add to the significance of the church’s doxological role?
- Read Acts 13:1–3 and 14:21–23. What is the process by which Barnabas and Saul are identified for missionary work in 13:1–3? Who initiates, who confirms, and who sends? What does Paul do at the close of his first missionary journey in 14:23? What do these two passages together suggest about the New Testament’s model for missionary sending and the planting of new churches?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the contemporary parachurch phenomenon is, in large part, the product of the local church’s failure to fulfill her own calling. Is this diagnosis accurate? Is the parachurch’s growth primarily a response to the church’s failure, or does it reflect a legitimate recognition that some ministry functions genuinely require specialized institutions beyond what any single local church can provide? How do you weigh these two factors?
- The lesson draws a distinction between the parachurch as a legitimate supplementary institution (the “servant model”) and the parachurch as an illegitimate replacement for the local church (the “displacement model”). Is this distinction practically workable? What specific criteria would you use to determine whether

a given parachurch organization is serving the local church or displacing it? Can the same organization do both depending on how it is engaged?

- The lesson identifies three functions as “inherently ecclesial”, the administration of the ordinances, the exercise of church discipline, and pastoral oversight. Why are these three specifically non-transferable to the parachurch? What do they have in common that makes them uniquely dependent on the local church’s covenantal structure? Are there other functions the lesson has not identified that are equally non-transferable?
- Ephesians 4:16 says that the body builds “itself up” through the proper working of each individual part, implying that the church’s growth comes from within the body rather than from external supplement. How does this text function as a theological argument against parachurch dependence? Are there ways in which parachurch contributions might legitimately be incorporated into this “body building itself up” framework?
- The lesson ends with the claim that “the local church is God’s Plan A, and she is sufficient for everything He has called her to do.” Is this claim defensible in a context where some local churches are genuinely failing in significant aspects of their calling? Does the sufficiency claim apply to a local church that, by any honest assessment, is not being faithful to the provision Christ has given her? How do you hold together the claim of sufficiency with the reality of ecclesial failure?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson identifies “committed, covenantal, accountable membership” as the antidote to parachurch dependence. What does this look like in practice for this congregation? What specific obligations does committed membership entail that mere attendance does not? Are there aspects of your current participation in this congregation that fall short of the committed membership the lesson describes?
- Ephesians 4:11–12 identifies the pastor’s primary calling as equipping the saints for the work of service, not doing all the service himself. How does this vision of the pastoral office challenge the common conception of the pastor as the congregation’s primary ministry professional? What would change in this congregation’s culture if every member genuinely understood themselves as a minister equipped by the pastor for the work of service?
- The lesson argues that the church’s financial health is undermined when members route their primary charitable giving to parachurch organizations rather than to the local church. What is the biblical principle that governs the priority of the local church in a member’s giving? How does this congregation currently communicate its financial needs and the theological rationale for prioritizing local church giving? What would you say to a member who argues that their parachurch giving “goes further” than local church giving?
- Christ’s promise in Matthew 16:18, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it”, is the bedrock of the church’s sufficiency. How does this promise function practically in the life of a pastor or elder who is laboring in a struggling congregation? What does it mean to trust this promise when the congregation’s circumstances seem to contradict it? What does “building” look like in a congregation that is not growing numerically?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Ephesians 3:20–21 aloud as the doxological horizon of this entire lesson: “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” Pause on the phrase “the power that works within us.” The power that will accomplish far more than we ask or think is not an external program, a parachurch organization, a celebrity conference, or an online community. It is the power of the Holy Spirit working within the covenant community gathered before God. And the glory of that power belongs in the church, not beside the church, not above the church, not distributed among the church’s many parachurch supplements, in the church, and in Christ Jesus, to all generations forever and ever. Let that doxological conviction ground every prayer that follows.

Pray for this congregation as the sufficient instrument of God’s purposes in this community. Give thanks for the Word that is preached here, the ordinances that are administered here, the elders who shepherd here, the gifts that are exercised here. These are not resources that this congregation has generated through its own institutional effort; they are Christ’s provision for His people, and they are sufficient for everything He has called this congregation to do. Pray that this congregation would be faithful to the resources it has been given, that it would not look past them to supplementary alternatives but would pour itself into the patient, faithful, Spirit-trusting use of the Word, the ordinances, the pastoral office, and the gifts of every member.

Pray specifically for those members of this congregation who are most at risk of parachurch displacement, the most gifted, the most ministry-motivated, the most passionate about mission and discipleship, that they would understand their gifts as given for the building up of this specific body, their energy as needed by this specific congregation, and their resources as the provision of God for this specific community. Pray that they would resist the cultural pressure to route their best investment through parachurch channels and instead give the first and the best of their gifts, energy, and resources to the covenant community that Christ has placed them in.

Pray for the parachurch organizations that this congregation or its members currently support. Pray that those organizations would maintain the servant orientation that makes them legitimate supplements to the local church’s ministry rather than competitors with it: that the seminary would send its graduates into local church ministry rather than into parachurch careers, that the mission agency would strengthen the sending churches’ missionary vision rather than replacing it, that the mercy organization would amplify the congregation’s care for the poor rather than substituting for it. Pray for wisdom in the congregation’s own decisions about which parachurch partnerships to maintain, which to deepen, and which to reconsider in the light of the ecclesiological convictions this series is establishing.

Close with Matthew 16:18 as the prayer’s anchor: “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” Pray in the confidence that the Builder has made this promise and will keep it. Pray for the specific situations in this congregation’s life that seem most resistant to the building, the members who are drifting, the relationships that are strained, the ministry areas that are struggling, the mission engagements that are not bearing visible fruit. Pray with the confidence that the gates of Hades will not prevail. Pray that this congregation would be found faithful when the Builder returns, faithful to the Word, faithful to the ordinances, faithful to the discipline, faithful to the gifts, faithful to the covenant community, and that to Him would be the glory, in this church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations, forever and ever.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 3:10, 21; 4:11–16; Hebrews 10:24–25; 1 Timothy 3:15

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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