

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 10: THE CHURCH'S MISSION

Sent into the World with the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Lesson 29

THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

In the World but Not of It — Engaging Culture Without Being Absorbed by It

The church that withdraws from the world abandons her mission. The church that conforms to the world loses her message. The church that is genuinely in the world and genuinely not of it — present without being absorbed, distinct without being absent — is the church that is most fully fulfilling the calling her Lord described in His final prayer.

“I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.”

John 17:15–18, NASB 1995

Key Texts: John 17:14–18; Matthew 5:13–16; James 1:27; Jeremiah 29:4–7; 1 Peter 2:11–12; Philippians 2:14–16

“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

Lesson 28 established the Great Commission as the church's governing mandate in its dispersal into the world: go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching, in the authority of the risen Lord and in the confidence of His promised presence until the end of the age. This lesson addresses the condition under which that mandate is to be fulfilled: the church in the world. The church does not go into the world as a conquering army that subdues a foreign territory and imposes its own order. It does not go as a cultural critic that stands at a safe remove from the world it is addressing. And it does not go as a diplomatic visitor that is welcomed in specific contexts and restricted to approved activities. It goes as the community that its Lord described in His final prayer: 'I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world' (John 17:15-18).

The tension that John 17:14-18 describes is the defining feature of the church's relationship to the world for the entire period between the ascension and the parousia: in the world (verse 18: 'As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world') but not of the world (verse 16: 'They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world'). Both dimensions are essential; neither is optional; and the failure to maintain both simultaneously is the failure that has most repeatedly and most visibly characterized the church's cultural engagement across its history. The church that withdraws from the world to protect its own purity has honored the 'not of the world' while abandoning the 'sent into the world.' The church that conforms to the world in order to maintain its cultural relevance and its social acceptability has honored the 'in the world' while abandoning the 'not of the world.' The narrow path between withdrawal and accommodation is the path that John 17 describes: fully sent into the world, fully maintained in the sanctification of truth, fully present without being absorbed.

The lesson examines this tension across its most important practical dimensions: the meaning and the requirement of genuine presence in the world, the prophetic witness that the community owes the world in its proclamation of God's truth on every matter the Scripture addresses, the twin dangers of cultural accommodation and cultural withdrawal that threaten the faithfulness of the church's engagement, the salt and light principle as the structural description of what faithful cultural presence looks like, the obligation of mercy ministry as an essential expression of the gospel the community proclaims, and the eschatological perspective that gives the church both its patience and its urgency in a world it inhabits but does not belong to.

The treatment of these themes comes at the penultimate lesson of the entire series, in the position that the series' logic requires: the community has been formed in its theological identity (Units 1-4), ordered in its governance (Unit 5), sealed in its covenant (Units 6-7), maintained in its integrity (Unit 8), gathered in its worship (Unit 9), and commissioned for its mission (Unit 10). It now lives in the world as the community it has become through all of this formation, and the question this lesson addresses is how a community that is genuinely what this series has described relates to the world it inhabits and to which it is sent. The answer is the answer of John 17: fully in it, genuinely not of it, sent as the Father sent the Son, sustained by the sanctification of truth.

I. THE DEFINING TENSION

In the World but Not of It

A. *John 17 and the High Priestly Prayer*

John 17 is the theological high point of the Gospel of John, recording the prayer that Jesus offered for His disciples, and for all who would believe through their witness (verse 20), on the night before His crucifixion. The prayer covers the disciples' protection (verses 11-16), their sanctification (verses 17-19), and their unity (verses 20-23), and all three petitions are placed in the context of the disciples' relationship to the world: the world that hated them (verse 14), the world into which they are sent (verse 18), and the world that needs to believe that the Father sent the Son (verse 21). The community's relationship to the world is not incidental to its identity; it is constitutive of its mission and the source of its greatest vulnerability.

The prayer's most precise formulation of the tension is the double negative of verses 14-16: 'I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.' The 'not of the world' is stated twice, a deliberate repetition that marks it as a fixed and defining characteristic, not a contingent circumstance that might change with different conditions. The community is not of the world because it has received the Word that transforms its fundamental orientation, its ultimate allegiances, and its deepest identity. The world hates this community precisely because the community's genuine difference from it is a standing rebuke to the world's own self-understanding.

But the prayer equally insists on the 'sent into the world' of verse 18: 'As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.' The sending is as fundamental to the community's identity as the 'not of the world.' The community is not called to protect its purity in a safe enclave separated from the world that hates it; it is sent into that world with the same missional commission that defined the Son's own incarnation. The incarnation is the prototype of the community's mission: the Son was sent into the world, became genuinely present in it, engaged its suffering and its fallenness, proclaimed the truth of the Father's character and the Father's love, and accomplished the reconciliation that the world needed. The community that is sent 'as the Father sent the Son' is sent to be genuinely present in the world, genuinely engaged with its suffering and its fallenness, genuinely proclaiming the truth that the world needs, and genuinely demonstrating the love that the gospel declares, while remaining genuinely not of the world in its ultimate allegiances, its deepest identity, and its defining hope.

B. *First Peter's Sojourner Identity*

First Peter 2:11-12 provides the most sustained New Testament account of the community's sojourner identity in the world: 'Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.' The 'aliens and strangers' imagery captures the dual character of John 17's tension in a single powerful metaphor: an alien is genuinely present in a country that is not his home, genuinely engaged in its life and its concerns, but always with the awareness that his ultimate citizenship is elsewhere, that the values and the commitments of his homeland

are different from those of the country he inhabits, and that the primary obligation he carries is to his homeland's king rather than to the host country's culture.

The sojourner's presence is genuine presence, not a tourist's temporary visit but a resident alien's sustained, engaged, relationally embedded inhabitation of the country she does not ultimately belong to. The sojourner knows the language, participates in the community's life, forms genuine relationships, and contributes meaningfully to the common good of the community she inhabits. But she does not assimilate, she does not adopt the fundamental values, the ultimate loyalties, or the defining identity of the culture she inhabits at the cost of her own homeland's identity. The church in the world is this sojourner: genuinely present, genuinely engaged, genuinely contributing, genuinely caring, but always with the ultimate loyalty and the ultimate identity that 'not of the world' requires.

Philippians 2:14-16 adds the luminous metaphor that captures the community's positive witness in the world it inhabits: 'Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life.' The community that does all things without grumbling, that is blameless and innocent in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, appears as lights in the world. The light is not something the community produces by strategic effort; it is what the community is when it is genuinely what it is, when it is genuinely the regenerate, covenant-faithful, Spirit-formed community that the preceding units have described. The genuine difference is the genuine witness; the genuine distinctiveness from the surrounding culture is the genuine presence of the light that illuminates and reveals and enables navigation through the darkness.

II. THE PROPHETIC WITNESS

Speaking God's Truth into the World

A. *The Church's Prophetic Calling*

The community that is genuinely not of the world has something to say to the world that the world cannot say to itself: the truth of the God who created the world, the truth of the human condition before that God, the truth of the redemption that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has accomplished, and the truth of the standards by which the Creator calls His creation to live. This is the church's prophetic witness, the proclamation of the truth that the world needs but does not possess, addressed to the world's specific conditions, failures, and questions with the courage and the compassion that genuine prophetic speech requires. The prophetic witness is not optional; it is the necessary consequence of the community's identity as the one in the world who knows what the world needs to know.

The prophetic witness encompasses the full range of the matters on which God's Word speaks, not merely the matters on which cultural consensus has already been established. The community that speaks prophetically about the gospel's offer of forgiveness and eternal life but falls silent about the specific sexual ethics that the gospel requires, the specific account of marriage that the gospel defines, the specific value of unborn human life that the gospel's anthropology establishes, and the specific claims of Christ's lordship over every dimension of human existence, has not yet fulfilled the prophetic witness to which it is called. The prophetic community speaks

the full truth, including the parts that are culturally unwelcome, socially costly, and personally offensive to those who hear them, with the same conviction, the same compassion, and the same courage that the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament displayed in their own cultural contexts.

The prophetic witness must be distinguished from the kind of cultural and political engagement that confuses the church's prophetic role with a political agenda. The church that speaks prophetically about justice, mercy, sexual ethics, the sanctity of life, and the claims of Christ is not a political party pursuing a legislative agenda; it is the covenant community declaring the Word of the God who governs all of human life. The prophetic proclamation does not endorse specific political candidates or specific policy platforms; it declares the biblical standards that every political platform and every cultural arrangement is accountable to. The church that has confused its prophetic witness with partisan political advocacy has allowed a specific cultural agenda to displace the transcendent authority of the Word that the prophetic witness is called to declare. The church that has retreated from all cultural engagement to avoid this confusion has abandoned the prophetic responsibility it cannot surrender.

B. Truth on Specific Matters

The church's prophetic witness on specific matters of cultural, moral, and social concern requires both fidelity to what the Scripture specifically says and wisdom about how the Scripture's specific teachings are best communicated in the community's specific cultural context. On the matter of sexual ethics, the Scripture is unambiguous: sexual intimacy is reserved for the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; 1 Corinthians 6:18-20), and the specific sexual behaviors that the surrounding culture has normalized are addressed by the Scripture with equal clarity (Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). The church that refuses to speak these truths clearly and compassionately, either because they are culturally offensive or because the church's leadership fears the relational and institutional consequences of speaking them, has abandoned the prophetic witness it is called to maintain.

On the sanctity of human life, the Scripture is equally unambiguous: the human person bears the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6), the unborn child is a person known and named by God before birth (Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5), and the destruction of innocent human life is an offense against the God whose image the human person bears. The church that has accommodated the surrounding culture's normalization of abortion, euthanasia, or any other form of institutionalized destruction of innocent human life has allowed cultural consensus to override scriptural fidelity, and the prophetic witness requires the naming and the addressing of this specific failure with the same directness and the same compassion that the prophets brought to the specific failures of their own cultural contexts. The prophetic speech is not harsh; it is clear. It is not punitive; it is truth-telling. It is not self-righteous; it is the declaration of the Word of the God who created the human person and who is the only adequate authority for the treatment of the human person.

On the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation, the Scripture is specific and non-negotiable: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me' (John 14:6); 'And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). The church that has softened this claim in the name of ecumenical harmony, cultural sensitivity, or missional accessibility has surrendered the most essential element of its prophetic witness. The exclusive claim of Christ is not arrogance; it is the honest declaration of the most important truth the world needs to hear, that the God who created the world and who will judge it has provided, in His own Son, the only possible

path of reconciliation. To remain silent about this path, or to imply that other paths are equally adequate, is not kindness; it is the cruelest form of pastoral neglect.

III. THE TWIN DANGERS

Cultural Accommodation and Cultural Withdrawal

A. The Danger of Cultural Accommodation

Cultural accommodation is the failure mode that occurs when the church allows the values, the assumptions, the standards, and the cultural expectations of the surrounding world to reshape the church's message, its practice, and its identity in ways that compromise the genuine difference that 'not of the world' requires. The accommodating church does not typically abandon its theology in a single decisive act; it accommodates incrementally, each step justified by the pastoral concern to remain relevant and relatable to the culture it is trying to reach, each step moving the community a little further from the distinctive identity that the gospel defines and a little closer to the cultural consensus that makes no demands and offers no genuine alternative to the world's own self-understanding.

The specific forms of cultural accommodation that the contemporary evangelical church most consistently exhibits include: the theological softening of the gospel's exclusive claims in the name of inclusive welcome; the ethical accommodation of the surrounding culture's sexual ethics in the name of compassionate acceptance; the aesthetic capitulation to entertainment culture in the name of contextual worship; the rhetorical adoption of therapeutic categories in the name of pastoral sensitivity; and the political alignment with one or another cultural coalition in the name of prophetic engagement. Each of these accommodations begins with a genuine pastoral concern; each ends with a form of the church that is so conformed to the world it inhabits that it has ceased to be a genuine alternative to it. The salt has lost its saltiness, and it is thereafter good for nothing except to be thrown out and trampled under foot (Matthew 5:13).

The theological diagnosis of cultural accommodation is the diagnosis of idolatry: the accommodating church has allowed the idol of cultural approval to compete with the authority of the Word of God, and in the competition, the idol has won. The idol is not worshipped explicitly or named as a god; it is served implicitly through the repeated choices to prioritize the culture's acceptance over the Scripture's demands, to soften the message where the message is unwelcome, and to present the gospel in forms that remove the offense that the cross always carries for those who prefer their own wisdom to God's. The Galatians' failure was precisely this: having received the gospel of grace through Paul's proclamation, they were then persuaded to accommodate the Judaizing culture's demands in ways that emptied the gospel of its distinctive power. Paul's response to that accommodation is among the most severe in the New Testament: 'I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ' (Galatians 1:6-7).

B. The Danger of Cultural Withdrawal

Cultural withdrawal is the opposite failure mode: the church that, in an effort to protect its own purity and holiness, disengages from the world's life, retreats into a safe enclave of like-minded believers, and abandons the

genuine presence in the world that the missional commission requires. The withdrawing church honors the 'not of the world' while abandoning the 'sent into the world.' It protects itself from contamination but in doing so abandons the neighbors, the communities, and the world to which the gospel is addressed, without a witness and without a community of disciples to embody the alternative way of life that the gospel makes possible.

The temptation to withdrawal is most acute in periods of cultural hostility, when the surrounding culture's values are moving in directions that are most directly contrary to the gospel's standards, when the cost of genuine cultural presence is highest, and when the safety and the comfort of enclave Christianity are most appealing. The contemporary period of evangelical history is precisely such a period in much of the Western world, and the temptation to withdraw into communities of the like-minded, to retreat from cultural engagement into sectarian self-preservation, and to console the community with the thought that at least its own internal life is ordered according to the gospel's standards, this temptation is as real and as present as the temptation to accommodation that the previous section addressed. Both temptations are forms of the same fundamental failure: the failure to maintain the full tension of John 17's 'sent into the world' and 'not of the world' simultaneously.

Jeremiah 29:4-7 provides one of the most striking Old Testament illustrations of the proper posture of the covenant community in a hostile culture, addressed to the Israelite exiles in Babylon: 'Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters... Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.' The exiles were tempted to withdrawal, to treat their Babylonian residence as a temporary inconvenience to be endured until restoration came, living as minimally engaged residents of a culture they hoped to escape. The Lord's instruction was the opposite: build, plant, establish families, seek the welfare of Babylon, pray for it. Be genuinely present, genuinely engaged, genuinely contributing to the welfare of the city you inhabit, not as those who belong to Babylon, but as those who know that your ultimate allegiance is elsewhere and that your genuine presence in Babylon is itself a form of the witness that the God who sent you there requires.

IV. SALT AND LIGHT

The Structure of Faithful Cultural Presence

A. *The Matthew 5 Metaphors*

Matthew 5:13-16 provides the most compact and the most comprehensive description of the community's proper relationship to the world in which it is present: 'You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.' The two metaphors, salt and light, together describe the community's cultural presence in terms that address both the dangers that the previous section identified.

Salt preserves and flavors. In the ancient world before refrigeration, salt was the primary preservative, the substance that prevented decay, that extended the life of what would otherwise rot. The community that is genuinely salty, that maintains the genuine difference of 'not of the world', is the community that exercises a

preserving influence on the culture it inhabits. It slows the moral decay that the absence of the gospel produces; it prevents the full flowering of the corruption that human fallenness tends toward when it is left entirely to itself; it maintains in the cultural life a flavor of the justice, the mercy, the honesty, and the human dignity that the gospel defines and that the surrounding culture benefits from even when it does not acknowledge the gospel as its source. The salt that has lost its saltiness has lost its only distinctive property, it is indistinguishable from the surrounding soil, and it is therefore incapable of producing any of the effects that salt in the soil is meant to produce.

Light illuminates and exposes and enables navigation. The community that is genuinely the light of the world illuminates the darkness, it makes visible what the darkness conceals, it exposes what the darkness hides, and it enables navigation through conditions that would otherwise be disorienting and dangerous. The light's illuminating function is the community's prophetic function: speaking the truth into the darkness, naming what the surrounding culture prefers to leave unnamed, and declaring the reality that the darkness actively suppresses. The light cannot be hidden if it is genuine light, a city set on a hill, a lamp on a lampstand, cannot be concealed. And the light's purpose is not its own display but the Father's glory: 'that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.' The community's cultural presence is ultimately for the glory of the Father whose character it reflects and whose mission it embodies.

B. Good Works and the Credibility of the Gospel

Matthew 5:16's 'that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven' establishes the relationship between the community's visible conduct and the gospel's credibility in the clearest possible terms. The good works are not the gospel; they do not accomplish what the proclaimed Word accomplishes in calling sinners to repentance and faith. But the good works are the embodied evidence that the gospel the community proclaims is the gospel the community is actually living, that the transformation it announces is the transformation it is demonstrating, that the love it declares is the love it is practicing, and that the God whose character it describes is the God whose image is becoming visible in the lives of those who have received His grace. The watching world draws conclusions from what it observes, and the community whose observable conduct is consistent with its proclaimed message has a credibility that the community whose proclamation outpaces its practice does not possess.

First Peter 2:12 makes the same connection with the pastoral specificity of the sojourner context: 'Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.' The excellent behavior is specifically directed at the watching Gentiles whose initial response may be slander, the community's genuine difference is perceived as a threat, and the threatened culture responds by labeling the community as evildoers. But the visible, excellent, consistent good deeds of the community over time produce a reversal: the slanderers observe the good deeds, and the observation leads eventually, perhaps not immediately, perhaps not easily, to the glorification of God on the day of visitation. The good works are the community's most sustained and most credible argument that the gospel it proclaims is the power of God for the transformation of human beings.

The good works that Matthew 5 and 1 Peter 2 describe are not limited to the specifically religious activities of the covenant community's gathered life; they are the full range of the community's activity in the world, the honesty in business dealings, the care for the vulnerable, the service of the common good, the treatment of neighbors, the use of resources, the practice of justice, the expression of mercy, and the demonstration of the love that the

gospel defines. Every member of the covenant community is a living argument for or against the gospel's power in her specific sphere of daily life, in her workplace, her neighborhood, her family, and her social relationships. The community whose members are visibly, consistently, and genuinely living the gospel in these everyday spheres is the community whose prophetic proclamation has the most credible platform.

V. MERCY MINISTRY

The Obligatory Expression of the Gospel Proclaimed

A. James 1:27 and the Definition of Pure Religion

James 1:27 is among the most direct and most demanding statements about the church's obligation to the vulnerable: 'Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.' The definition is startling in its specificity: pure religion, genuine, undefiled, actually acceptable to God, is defined not primarily by correct doctrine, correct worship forms, or correct institutional practices, but by the care of the orphan and the widow in their distress and by the keeping of oneself unstained by the world. The two elements are connected: the community that genuinely keeps itself unstained by the world (the 'not of the world' dimension) will also genuinely care for the orphan and the widow (the engaged, present, active mercy that the 'in the world' dimension requires). Both are marks of the pure religion that God actually receives.

The orphan and the widow represent, in the biblical idiom, the class of the most vulnerable and most marginalized members of the ancient Near Eastern community: those without the natural social protection of a father and a husband in a patriarchal culture, those most likely to be overlooked, exploited, or left without provision. The instruction to visit them in their distress is an instruction to be present with and active on behalf of the most vulnerable, not merely to express sympathy for their condition from a safe and comfortable distance, but to engage with their actual needs in the actual situations where those needs are most acute. The 'visit' (episkeptomai) carries the active, investigative, intervening sense of the word: to go to, to look after, to provide for. It is not charity at arm's length; it is the engaged, present, sacrificial care of those whose need is real and whose vulnerability is genuine.

The obligation of mercy ministry is not optional for the community that has genuinely received the gospel. The community that has been shown mercy, that has been rescued from its own vulnerability before God by the grace of the One who came to the help of the helpless, is the community that most fully understands what mercy looks like and most fully understands the obligation to extend it. The failure to care for the orphan and the widow is not merely a social failure; it is a theological failure, a failure to embody the character of the God whose mercy defines the community's own existence. Micah 6:8 states the obligation at the level of God's most fundamental requirements: 'He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' The doing of justice and the loving of kindness are not optional supplements to the walking humbly with God; they are part of the same single requirement.

B. Mercy Ministry and the Gospel

The relationship between mercy ministry and gospel proclamation is the relationship between the community's embodied witness and its verbal witness, two forms of the same essential declaration about who God is and what He has done. The community that proclaims the gospel without mercy ministry has a verbal declaration that lacks the embodied credibility that genuine love for the neighbor produces. The community that practices mercy ministry without gospel proclamation has a compassionate presence that lacks the verbal declaration of the reconciliation that the compassion is pointing toward. Both together, the verbal proclamation and the embodied mercy, constitute the full witness that the community's commission requires.

The specific form that mercy ministry takes in any congregation's life is shaped by the specific needs of the specific community the congregation inhabits. The congregation in an urban context will encounter different forms of vulnerability and marginalization than the congregation in a rural context; the congregation in a culturally homogeneous setting will encounter different forms of social exclusion than the congregation in a culturally diverse setting; the congregation with significant financial resources will have different capacities for mercy ministry than the congregation with limited resources. But the obligation to care for the vulnerable, to be genuinely present with and genuinely active on behalf of those whose distress is real, is the same for every congregation in every context, and the community that is genuinely following the Lord who described Himself as one who 'preached good news to the poor' and 'proclaimed release to the captives' (Luke 4:18) will find the specific forms of mercy ministry that its specific context requires.

The eschatological grounding of mercy ministry is provided by Matthew 25:31-46, the account of the final judgment in which the nations are separated as sheep and goats on the basis of their response to 'the least of these My brothers', the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. The Son of Man's identification of Himself with the most vulnerable ('to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me') does not establish mercy ministry as a means of salvation; it establishes it as the evidence of the transformed life that genuine salvation produces. The community that has genuinely received the mercy of God, that has been visited by the One who came to seek and to save the lost, will be recognizable by its own visiting of the vulnerable, its own seeking of the lost, and its own expression of the mercy it has received in the mercy it extends.

VI. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Faithful in the Present Age, Longing for the Age to Come

A. The Church Does Not Belong to This Age

The community's proper relationship to the world is permanently shaped by the eschatological conviction that this world is not its ultimate home, that its citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), and that the present age, with all its cultural conflicts, its social struggles, its political arrangements, and its institutional forms, is not the final state of affairs. The community lives in the present age as those who know it will not last; it works within the present age's structures and engages its challenges with the faithfulness that its commission requires; but it does not place its ultimate hope in the present age's improvement, and it is not devastated by the present age's deterioration. Its hope is anchored not in cultural progress but in the return of the Lord who has all authority in heaven and on earth and who will, at His return, make all things new.

The eschatological perspective is simultaneously the foundation of the community's missional patience and the ground of its resistance to the idolatry of utopian cultural transformation. The community that has genuinely received the eschatological hope that the apostolic deposit defines will not be surprised when the culture moves in directions contrary to the gospel, will not be crushed when cultural gains are reversed, and will not be tempted to identify the kingdom of God with any specific cultural or political arrangement that the present age might produce. The kingdom is not something the church builds through missional activism; it is the reality that the returning King will bring at His return. The church's labor in the present age is the labor of faithful witness, preaching the gospel, making disciples, caring for the vulnerable, maintaining its covenant integrity, not the labor of kingdom construction.

This eschatological patience does not produce cultural passivity. The community that genuinely longs for the return of the Lord who will make all things new is also the community that most genuinely cares about the partial, broken, provisional, but real improvements in human welfare that faithful obedience to the gospel produces in the present age. The abolitionist who worked for the end of slavery in the nineteenth century was not building the kingdom; he was being faithful to the gospel's account of human dignity in the specific cultural situation where that faithfulness was most urgently required. The crisis pregnancy center that provides practical support to women in desperate circumstances is not establishing the kingdom; it is being faithful to the mercy ministry that the gospel requires in the specific social situation where that faithfulness is most immediately needed. The eschatological perspective does not diminish the value of present-age faithfulness; it places it in the proper framework: faithful labor in the present age, confident hope for the age to come.

B. The Church's Witness to the World's Judgment and Redemption

The community's relationship to the world is shaped not only by its awareness of the world's present need but by its knowledge of the world's future destiny. The world to which the church is sent is the world that God is reconciling to Himself in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19) and the world whose present form is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:31). Both truths simultaneously: the world is the object of God's redemptive love, and the world in its present cultural form will not survive the return of the Lord who comes to judge and to renew. The community that holds both truths together, the world as the object of God's love and the world's present cultural form as passing away, will engage the world with both genuine evangelistic urgency and genuine eschatological realism.

The prophetic dimension of the church's witness to the world includes the witness to the world's future judgment: the announcement that the risen Christ who has all authority in heaven and on earth is also the returning Judge before whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11), that the judgment of the nations described in Matthew 25 is the specific destiny toward which every culture and every human being is moving, and that the invitation of the gospel, 'be reconciled to God' (2 Corinthians 5:20), is the only means by which that destiny is transformed from judgment to welcome. The community that speaks this truth, that the world is heading toward the judgment of its Creator and that the gospel is the only path of reconciliation, is not speaking a message of despair; it is speaking the most urgent, most compassionate, most loving message the world can receive.

The eschatological perspective also shapes the community's posture toward the cultural and political institutions of the present age. The community renders to Caesar what is Caesar's (Matthew 22:21), prays for kings and those in authority (1 Timothy 2:2), honors the governing authorities as God's servants for the restraint of evil (Romans 13:1-7), and seeks the welfare of the city where it is placed (Jeremiah 29:7). But the community does not confuse

the present age's institutions with the kingdom of God, does not invest its ultimate hope in political processes or cultural movements, and does not allow the urgent demands of present-age activism to displace the primary commission of the gospel proclamation and disciple-making that constitutes its irreducible calling. The community is engaged in the present age with genuine seriousness and genuine faithfulness, and it is living beyond the present age with genuine hope and genuine anticipation of the age that is coming.

VII. THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD AND THE WHOLE SERIES

A Community That Knows What It Is and Where It Is Going

A. The Formation That Makes Faithful Presence Possible

The community that is genuinely able to maintain the full tension of John 17, genuinely present in the world, genuinely not of the world, genuinely sent with the commission that defines its mission, is the community that has been formed in the identity that the full series has been describing. The theological formation of Units 1-4 gives the community the knowledge of who it is that makes genuine cultural presence possible without cultural absorption: the community that knows its own identity as the new covenant community of the redeemed, constituted by genuine faith and marked by the covenant sign of believers' baptism, is the community that has the theological resources to resist the cultural pressures that would assimilate it into the world's own self-understanding. The formation precedes the presence; the identity precedes the witness.

The disciplinary formation of Unit 8 gives the community the covenant integrity that its public witness requires. The community that maintains the genuine distinction between the regenerate and the unregenerate, that exercises the pastoral accountability that genuine covenant community requires, and that addresses serious unrepented sin with the restorative discipline that the apostolic mandate prescribes, is the community whose public witness has the internal consistency that credibility requires. The community that tolerates in its membership the same patterns of life that characterize the surrounding culture has no meaningful difference to display; it has become, in practice, the indistinguishable community whose salt has lost its savor and whose light has been covered by the basket of its accommodation.

The worshipping formation of Unit 9 gives the community the Spirit-formed character that genuine missional presence requires. The community that gathers regularly before the living God in the corporate worship that the regulative principle describes, that hears the Word proclaimed and responds in prayer and singing and covenant renewal at the Table, is the community that is being continuously renewed in the genuine difference that 'not of the world' requires. The worship is not a retreat from the world; it is the renewal of the community's identity and its mission before re-entering the world with the witness that the commission requires. The gathered life and the dispersed mission are two movements of the same dance: gather to be formed and renewed; disperse to witness and serve; return to be formed and renewed again.

B. One Lesson Before the Final Doxology

This lesson stands one position before the series' closing doxology, the vision of the church triumphant that Lesson 30 will provide. The community that has been formed through twenty-nine lessons in the covenant theology, the

governance, the ordinances, the discipline, the worship, the mission, and the cultural engagement of the new covenant community is a community that knows what it is, where it is, and where it is going. It knows what it is: the covenant community of the redeemed, constituted by genuine faith, marked by the covenant sign, governed by qualified elders, sealed by the ordinances, maintained in integrity by discipline, gathered in worship before the living God. It knows where it is: in the world but not of the world, sent into the world as the Father sent the Son, present in the world as aliens and strangers whose citizenship is in heaven. And it knows where it is going: toward the return of the Lord who has all authority, toward the consummation of the kingdom He has been building, toward the eschatological worship of the multitude from every nation standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

This triple knowledge, what it is, where it is, and where it is going, is the theological foundation of the community's faithful cultural presence. The community that does not know what it is will be absorbed by the world it is trying to reach. The community that does not know where it is will either withdraw from the world in fear of contamination or accommodate the world in pursuit of acceptance. The community that does not know where it is going will either place its ultimate hope in present-age cultural transformation or succumb to the despair that the present age's deterioration produces. The community that knows all three, what it is, where it is, and where it is going, is the community that can maintain the full tension of John 17 with the faithfulness, the courage, and the joy that the Lord who prayed it intends. Let that community be this community. Let this congregation be, in its specific time and place and cultural context, the salt that has not lost its savor and the light that is not hidden under the basket. And let the Father in heaven receive the glory that belongs to Him from the watching world that sees the good works of His covenant community and recognizes in them the character of the God who sent His Son into the world that He might not perish but have everlasting life.

"I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world."

John 17:15–16, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

John 17:14-18	The High Priestly Prayer's account of the community's dual identity in the world: 'not of the world' (stated twice in verses 14 and 16, a deliberate repetition establishing it as a fixed, defining characteristic) and 'sent into the world' (verse 18: 'As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world'). Both are equally essential; neither is optional. The incarnation is the prototype of the community's mission: genuinely present, genuinely engaged, genuinely proclaiming truth, genuinely demonstrating love, while remaining genuinely not of the world in ultimate allegiances and defining identity.
Cultural Accommodation	The failure mode in which the church allows the values, assumptions, standards, and cultural expectations of the surrounding world to reshape the church's message, practice, and identity in ways that compromise the genuine difference that 'not of the world' requires. Occurs incrementally, each step justified by the pastoral concern for relevance. Specific contemporary forms: theological softening of exclusive claims; ethical accommodation of sexual ethics; aesthetic capitulation to entertainment culture; rhetorical adoption of therapeutic categories. Diagnosis: the idolatry of cultural approval; the salt that has lost its savor.
Cultural Withdrawal	The opposite failure mode: the church that, to protect its purity, disengages from the world's life, retreats into a safe enclave, and abandons the genuine presence that the missional commission requires. Honors 'not of the world' while abandoning 'sent into the world.' Most acute in periods of cultural hostility. The Jeremiah 29 exile community as the counter-example: 'seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf.' Be genuinely present, genuinely engaged, genuinely contributing, while maintaining ultimate allegiance to the homeland.
Salt and Light	Matthew 5:13-16: the community's dual cultural function. Salt preserves and flavors, slows moral decay, maintains the flavor of justice and mercy and human dignity in the surrounding culture, exercises a preserving influence through genuine distinctiveness. Light illuminates and exposes, makes visible what darkness conceals, enables navigation, fulfills the prophetic function of speaking truth into darkness. Both functions depend on genuine saltiness and genuine luminosity: salt that has lost its flavor is 'no longer good for anything'; light that is hidden under a basket serves no function. The goal: 'that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.'
James 1:27	The most specific New Testament definition of pure religion: 'to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.' The two elements are connected: genuine preservation from the world's contamination produces genuine care for the world's most vulnerable. The 'visit' (episkeptomai) carries the active, investigative, intervening sense: not charity at arm's length but engaged, present, sacrificial care of those whose need is real. The definition is startling: pure religion is defined by care of the vulnerable and unstained character, not primarily by correct doctrine or correct forms.
Sojourner Identity	1 Peter 2:11-12: 'I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts... Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles.' The community is genuinely present in a country that is not its ultimate home, knowing the language, participating in community life, forming genuine relationships, contributing to the common good. But not assimilating: not adopting the fundamental values, ultimate loyalties, or defining identity of the host culture. The sojourner's ultimate citizenship is elsewhere; the community's ultimate citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).
Prophetic Witness	The community's declaration of God's truth into the world's specific conditions, failures, and questions, addressing the full range of matters on which God's Word speaks with the courage

	and compassion that genuine prophetic speech requires. Includes: the exclusive claims of Christ, the specific sexual ethics the gospel requires, the sanctity of unborn human life, the account of marriage the gospel defines, and the comprehensive lordship of Christ over every dimension of human existence. Distinguished from partisan political advocacy by its grounding in the transcendent authority of the Word rather than in a specific cultural or political agenda.
Jeremiah 29:4-7	The Lord's instruction to the Israelite exiles in Babylon: 'Build houses and live in them... Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf.' The counter-example against cultural withdrawal for the covenant community in a hostile culture. The exiles were tempted to minimal engagement while waiting for restoration. The Lord's instruction: be genuinely present, genuinely engaged, genuinely contributing to the welfare of the city you inhabit, not as those who belong to Babylon, but as those whose genuine presence in the hostile city is itself a form of witness.
Eschatological Realism	The community's refusal to place its ultimate hope in the present age's cultural improvement, and its corresponding refusal to be devastated by the present age's deterioration. Grounded in the conviction that the present age's cultural form is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:31) and that the returning King will make all things new. Produces: missional patience (the mission will succeed regardless of cultural trends), resistance to the idolatry of utopian cultural transformation, genuine engagement with present-age faithfulness without confusion between present-age faithfulness and kingdom-building, and sustained hope anchored in the return of Christ rather than in cultural progress.
Mercy Ministry	The community's active, engaged care for the vulnerable, the marginalized, and those in distress, the orphans, widows, poor, sick, and imprisoned who represent, in the biblical idiom, those most likely to be overlooked and exploited. Grounded in James 1:27 (the definition of pure religion), Micah 6:8 (doing justice and loving kindness), Luke 4:18 (Jesus' proclamation of good news to the poor), and Matthew 25:31-46 (the Son of Man's identification with the least of these). Not optional but obligatory; not a means of salvation but the evidence of the transformed life that genuine salvation produces; not the gospel but the embodied credibility of the gospel proclaimed.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the full tension of John 17, in the world and not of the world, is not a paradox to be resolved by choosing one side but a calling to be maintained by holding both sides simultaneously. The church that chooses 'not of the world' and abandons 'sent into the world' has honored one half of its Lord's prayer while disobeying the other. The church that chooses 'sent into the world' and abandons 'not of the world' has honored one half while abandoning the other. The faithful church holds both, and it does so not by finding a comfortable middle position that reduces both to something less demanding, but by the Spirit-dependent, Word-sustained, worship-renewed faithfulness that genuine obedience to the full tension requires.

We must believe that cultural accommodation and cultural withdrawal are equally dangerous failure modes, that the church that conforms to the world is not more faithful than the church that withdraws from it, and the church that withdraws from the world is not more holy than the church that remains engaged with it. Both represent failures of the full John 17 calling. Both impoverish the community's witness. And both require the same theological corrective: a clear, robust, Spirit-formed identity in the covenant community that is genuinely different from the world it inhabits, and a genuine, sustained, sacrificial presence in the world it is sent into.

We must believe that mercy ministry is not optional for the community that has genuinely received the gospel. James 1:27 is not the recommendation of an especially compassionate form of Christianity; it is the definition of pure religion. The community that preaches the gospel without caring for the orphan and the widow has not yet understood that the God whose gospel it preaches is the God who visits the vulnerable, the God whose care for the marginalized is one of the most consistent themes of the entire scriptural witness from the Mosaic law through the prophets through Jesus' own ministry through the apostolic instructions.

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

We should feel a genuine love for the specific world we inhabit, the specific neighborhood, the specific community, the specific culture, the specific people in our daily lives whose need for the gospel and whose need for the mercy ministry it produces are real and present. Not a generic concern for the abstract world but a specific, personally engaged love for the specific people whom this congregation specifically knows and to whom it is specifically sent. This love is the love that John 17's 'sent into the world as You sent Me' requires: the love that the Son expressed in His incarnation, His engagement, His presence, His ministry, and His sacrifice for the world He was sent into.

We should feel an honest resistance to the specific form of cultural accommodation or cultural withdrawal that most tempts this congregation in its specific cultural context. For many evangelical congregations, the temptation to accommodation is most acute around the cultural expectations of therapeutic culture, sexual ethics, and the desire for social acceptability. For others, the temptation to withdrawal is most acute around the fear of cultural contamination, the comfort of enclave Christianity, and the preference for a community of the like-minded over the costly engagement of genuine presence in a hostile culture. Honest self-assessment about which temptation is most present is the first step toward the faithfulness that genuine resistance requires.

We should desire for this congregation to be known, in its specific community, as a community that is genuinely present, genuinely different, and genuinely caring. Present enough to know the specific needs of the specific

people in its specific neighborhood. Different enough that the watching community perceives the genuine alternative that the gospel makes possible. Caring enough that its mercy ministry is not a program but a genuine expression of the love that the gospel has produced in those who have received it. The community that is known this way is the community that is most fully fulfilling the John 17 calling, present without being absorbed, distinct without being absent.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read John 17:14-18 this week as a prayer for this congregation, not merely as a text to be studied but as the actual prayer that the Lord Jesus prayed for the community to which you belong. Receive each phrase personally: 'They are not of the world', what does this mean for your own life, your own ultimate allegiances, your own deepest identity? 'I have sent them into the world', what specific world are you being sent into, and what does genuine presence in that specific world require of you? 'Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth', how is the truth that this series has been providing equipping you for the cultural engagement that the sending requires?
- Conduct an honest personal assessment of the tension between cultural accommodation and cultural withdrawal in your own life. On the accommodation side: where have you softened the gospel's message, avoided the prophetic witness, or conformed your behavior or your public commitments to the surrounding culture's expectations in ways that compromise your genuine difference from it? On the withdrawal side: where have you retreated from the genuine engagement that genuine cultural presence requires, avoided the costly relationships, or chosen the comfort of the like-minded community over the engagement of the genuinely different one? Bring the honest assessment to a trusted fellow member of this congregation and ask for the accountability that genuine formation requires.
- Identify one specific form of mercy ministry that this congregation either currently practices or could begin practicing in its specific community, a specific form of care for the vulnerable that addresses a specific need in the specific place the congregation inhabits. It might be a food pantry, a crisis pregnancy center, a tutoring program, a prison ministry, a care for elderly neighbors, a befriending of refugees or immigrants, or some other form that is specific enough to be actionable and genuinely needed in this congregation's context. Bring a brief (one paragraph) description of the need and the potential form of care to the next elder-led conversation about the congregation's mercy ministry.
- Reflect on the specific people in your daily life, neighbors, coworkers, family members, who do not yet know the risen Christ, and assess your current relationship with each of them against the standard of genuine cultural presence that John 17 and Jeremiah 29 describe. Are you genuinely present in their lives, present enough to know their names, their specific needs, their joys and sorrows, or are you a resident of their neighborhood who has not yet become a genuine neighbor? What specific step toward genuine, relationally embedded presence with one specific person in your daily life would you commit to in the next thirty days?
- Read Jeremiah 29:4-14 as a meditation on the posture of the covenant community in a hostile culture. Note especially verse 7 (seek the welfare of the city, pray for it), verses 10-14 (the long view, the restoration that is coming, the plans God has for welfare not for calamity, the hope and future He has for His people). How does the combination of present-age engagement (seek the welfare of Babylon) and eschatological hope (plans for welfare, a future and a hope) describe the specific posture this congregation should maintain in its specific cultural context? Bring one specific insight from this reading to the next study session.

Key Texts: John 17:14–18; Matthew 5:13–16; James 1:27; Jeremiah 29:4–7; 1 Peter 2:11–12; Philippians 2:14–16

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Looking at this congregation's current cultural engagement, which danger do you think is more present: cultural accommodation (conforming to the world in ways that compromise the gospel's distinctiveness) or cultural withdrawal (retreating from the world in ways that abandon the mission)? What specific evidence supports your assessment? What would you say to someone who argued that the opposite danger is more present?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read John 17:14-21. How many times does Jesus say 'not of the world' or 'not of it' in these verses? What does the repetition signal? What does verse 15 say about what Jesus does NOT ask (taking them out of the world) and what he DOES ask (keeping them from the evil one)? What is the basis for the community's sending (verse 18)? What is the purpose of the community's unity in verse 21?
- Read Matthew 5:13-16. What happens to salt that has lost its taste, and what does this mean for the community's cultural presence? What is the function of light, and what would make light unable to function? What specific consequence is expected from the community's 'good works' (verse 16)? Note that the goal of the good works is not the community's reputation but the Father's glory.
- Read 1 Peter 2:9-12. What identity does verse 9 assign to the community, and what purpose does it identify for that identity (proclaiming the excellencies of the One who called them from darkness to light)? What does verse 11 call the community in relation to the world? What practical instruction does verse 12 give about behavior, and what hoped-for outcome does it describe?
- Read Jeremiah 29:4-14. What specific instructions does the Lord give the exiles in verses 4-6 about their engagement with Babylonian society? What does verse 7 command them to do for the city of their exile, and what reason does it give? What contrast does verse 8 draw between true and false prophets? What eschatological promise does the Lord give in verses 10-14?
- Read James 1:26-27. What does verse 26 say about the religion that does not control the tongue? How does verse 27 define pure and undefiled religion? What are the two components of the definition? How do the two components relate to each other, and how do they together describe the community's proper posture in the world?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the community's 'sent into the world' in John 17:18 models the pattern of the Incarnation, that the community is sent with the same genuine presence, genuine engagement, and genuine willingness to enter the world's suffering that characterized the Son's own mission. Is this a valid and illuminating parallel, or does it risk obscuring important differences between the Son's unique incarnational mission and the community's derivative missionary presence? What does the parallel illuminate, and where must it be qualified?
- The lesson identifies cultural accommodation as a form of idolatry, the worship of cultural approval in competition with the authority of the Word of God. Is this diagnosis too severe? Is there a form of contextual adaptation that is appropriate and necessary for effective cultural engagement, and how is it distinguished

from the cultural accommodation that the lesson identifies as idolatry? Where is the line between appropriate contextualization and inappropriate accommodation?

- The lesson argues that mercy ministry is not optional but obligatory, that James 1:27's definition of pure religion makes the care of the orphan and widow a requirement for the community that claims to practice genuine religion. Is this argument from James 1:27 persuasive? Does the verse establish mercy ministry as a requirement for the community, or is it describing the individual believer's personal practices? And how does mercy ministry relate to the community's primary commission of gospel proclamation?
- The lesson uses Jeremiah 29:4-7 to argue against cultural withdrawal, noting that the Lord's instruction to the Babylonian exiles was to build, plant, establish families, and seek the welfare of the city. Is this Old Testament text appropriately applied to the church's situation in a pluralistic modern culture? What are the continuities and the discontinuities between the Babylonian exile context and the church's contemporary cultural engagement context?
- The lesson describes the eschatological perspective as preventing both cultural passivity (because it grounds genuine present-age engagement) and utopian activism (because it prevents the confusion of present-age improvement with kingdom-building). How does the amillennial eschatology that this series has consistently affirmed specifically shape the congregation's approach to cultural engagement? What would be different about the cultural engagement of a postmillennialist who expected the gradual Christianization of culture, and why?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson calls the community to be 'present without being absorbed, distinct without being absent.' For this congregation specifically, what does genuine presence in the local community look like? What concrete ways is the congregation currently genuinely present in the neighborhood, and what concrete ways is it absent? What would the most significant single step toward greater genuine presence look like?
- The lesson identifies the community's prophetic witness as addressing the full range of matters on which God's Word speaks, including the exclusive claims of Christ, sexual ethics, the sanctity of life, and the comprehensive lordship of Christ. Does this congregation currently speak to all of these matters with the clarity and the compassion that the prophetic calling requires? Which is most clearly addressed, and which is most absent from the congregation's public witness? What accounts for the absence?
- The lesson argues that the community's internal formation, its theology, governance, ordinances, discipline, and worship, is the foundation that makes faithful cultural presence possible. Having now studied all of these dimensions of the covenant community's life over twenty-nine lessons, what do you identify as the single most significant gap between this congregation's current formation and the formation that this lesson identifies as necessary for faithful cultural engagement? What would closing that gap require?
- One lesson remains in the series: the vision of the church triumphant in Lesson 30. Before that final doxological lesson, write a brief (one paragraph) statement of what this entire series has given you, what you know now that you did not know before, what you understand differently, what you are committed to differently. What is the most significant single thing you carry from these twenty-nine lessons into your membership in this specific congregation, your specific calling in the world, and your specific hope for the age to come?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading John 17:15-21 aloud as the prayer that the Lord Jesus actually prayed for this community, for the disciples who were in the room, and for all who would believe through their word, which includes this congregation in this place at this moment in history: 'I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.' This prayer was prayed by the Son of God on the night of His betrayal, with the cross before Him, for this congregation. It has been answered in part and is still being answered. Receive it as your own calling and your own covering.

Pray for the congregation's faithfulness to the full John 17 tension. Pray for genuine presence in the specific world this congregation inhabits: that its members would be genuinely known in their neighborhoods, genuinely engaged in their workplaces, genuinely present with the specific people whose need for the gospel is real and whose opportunity to observe the gospel in action is the daily life this congregation's members live. Pray that the community would neither withdraw from the world in fearful self-protection nor accommodate the world in anxious self-promotion, but would maintain the narrow path of genuine presence that is simultaneously genuinely not-of-the-world: sanctified in truth, sustained by the Word, kept from the evil one, and clearly identified as belonging to the Father who sent the Son.

Pray for the congregation's prophetic witness to its specific cultural context. Pray for the courage to speak the truths that the surrounding culture finds unwelcome: the exclusive claims of Christ in a pluralistic environment, the sexual ethics of the gospel in a sexually permissive culture, the sanctity of human life in a culture that has normalized its destruction, and the comprehensive lordship of Christ in a culture that reserves its loyalties for the gods of its own choosing. Pray for the compassion that genuine prophetic speech requires: the willingness to speak hard truths from a posture of genuine love, genuine grief over the culture's failures, and genuine desire for the reconciliation that the gospel offers. And pray for the community's mercy ministry: that it would care for the orphan and the widow in their distress with the same genuine engagement that James 1:27 defines as pure religion and that the God who visits the vulnerable has always required of the community that bears His name.

Close with the prayer of the community that knows what it is, where it is, and where it is going. Give thanks for twenty-nine lessons that have together described the covenant community in its fullness: constituted, governed, sealed, disciplined, gathered, commissioned, and now engaged. Give thanks for the specific congregation of which this study is the theological formation, for its specific members, its specific elders, its specific gifts and limitations, its specific location in the world, and its specific calling within the Great Commission's scope. And pray specifically for Lesson 30, the final lesson, the doxological vision of the church triumphant, that the community would receive it not merely as the series' conclusion but as the eschatological horizon that gives every preceding lesson its ultimate meaning: the bride adorned, the multitude from every nation, the Lamb upon the throne, and the worship that never ends.

“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: John 17:14–18; Matthew 5:13–16; James 1:27; Jeremiah 29:4–7; 1 Peter 2:11–12; Philippians 2:14–16

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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