

## Section 2

The Biblical Alternative  
for Church Ministry, or  
When All Else Fails,  
Read the Bible



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# 3

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## Character and Conduct of the Church

The question raised by Pastors Robert and Jeff in the first two chapters are all too typical. In fact, their questions cover the essential gamut of debate in areas of study on the church today. Their questions are not “cloistered in ivory towers.” They are grounded in the genuine concerns of making the church all that God intended it to be. Their motives as well as their questions are good. Where they both fell short, Robert more than Jeff, was in the thing that concerned them most: a biblical blueprint. What is it? What is the relation of Christian ministry, as seen in the New Testament, to the church? What is the form and function of a church that genuinely desires its leadership, organization, relationships, and families to be grounded in the eternal truths of Scripture? It is to the description of that form and function that the remainder of this book is pointed.

### **CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH**

Multiple instructions and guidelines have been given concerning the character and nature of the church. Like barkers along the carnival midway, different teachers call from their booths—all with

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different offers. One will say, “The church exists to give glory to God.” Another will add, “The church exists to perform the dual roles of evangelism and edification.” From still others we hear, “The church is the church only when it exists for others.” Even without climbing on any of this carnival’s nerve-wrenching rides, one can come away dizzy and disoriented as he seeks answers for the form and function of the church. And certainly not last, from a larger corner booth we hear, “The church is realizing its true nature when you are able to worship ‘with your kind of people.’” Truth is found in sameness rather than oneness.

It is not surprising that the saint who wanders through this carnival of values and opinions has little bearing left for deciding where are the biblical spots for driving “the tent peg of ministry.” What guidelines are to be trusted for finding biblical bases? Vital to this overall question is the primary necessity of asking what the church *is* before we ask what the church is to *do*.

### THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

Conduct your own informal survey. Ask a few people what they think of when you say the word “church.” Odds are that four out of five, maybe nine out of ten, will speak in terms of buildings and programs. This easily illustrates how much our American culture resists a rethinking of the nature of the church. And yet the Scripture will insist that the church is “you who pray, not where you pray.” The New Testament church is made of flesh and blood, not brick and mortar.

#### **Ephesians 3:6**

*This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*

The apostle Paul was a minister with a unique message, called a

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“mystery,” which was revealed by God to him and the other apostles (3:5). This mystery was something unthinkable to the traditional and devout Jew. It was that the Jew and the Gentile were one. One body. Joint-heirs.

*Gentiles are heirs together with Israel.* The gospel of God had produced a remarkable unity. That heritage was rooted in those believers’ reception of the gospel and the gracious deposit of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their final redemption (1:13-14; cf, 1:18-19a). As well, there was now in Christ no middle wall of partition—not hostility—for those who were saved by grace (2:14). Christ was the end of the law. Until now Israel had had strict legislation that separated her from her Gentile neighbors, and Paul was saying, “Enough!” Indeed, the ground at the base of the cross was level.

*Members together of one body.* This unity or oneness reached to the imagery of a human body. Now both Jew and non-Jew were intimately joined in one spiritual body. The incredible thought of this spiritual merger must have been almost unthinkable to the orthodox Jew. Oil and water. That described the Jew and the Gentile. Yet here was revelation from God through Paul that these groups were joined together as co-members of one single Body. Just as it was physically impossible to divide a human body without detrimental effects, even so any conception of division or distinction between Jew and Gentile did serious harm to the work of the gospel.

*Sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus.* Furthermore, all the majesty and authority of the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms climaxed in the blessings of salvation in the Lord Jesus and in the reality of being co-owners of those promises. The devout Jew had always understood the primacy of Israel for the revelation and blessings of God. This understanding came from the biblical covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 12, 15). Now the grace of the Lord Jesus had extended equally to the Gentile world.

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The impact of this on the Jew was illustrated by Peter's repeated struggle with these concepts (Acts 10:19-23; Gal. 2:11-21).

### **Colossians 3:11**

*Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

To the New Testament authors the Body of Christ was "paradise regained." The restoration process was done at conversion (3:3). Now the life of all believers is "hidden with Christ in God." There is no distinction.

Distinctions were a specialized activity and concern in Christ's day. There were divisions based on nationality or creed, on family background or spiritual heritage, and on the social or economic status of a person. But in Christ "there is no . . ." distinction or division. This is the essence of the Body of Christ. Any thinking or system that begins to encourage distinction based on "earthly" standards misses the heart of the gospel impact on believers.

Strategically, it is from that very theological base that Paul then appeals to us to receive, bear with, and forgive one another "as the Lord forgave you." This behavior, bound together by love, will lead to the outworking of unity (3:12-14).

### **Galatians 3:28**

*There is neither Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul had also reminded his readers that this "distinctionless" body was also "neither slave nor free, male nor female." Again the composite of the Body of Christ is strategic to Paul's understanding of what believers are to understand about themselves and their mission in the world. In other words, if

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the body is functioning as it should in local assemblies, individual members will have no apprehension concerning their worth in terms of financial status, work circumstances, or even gender. Because of who they are in Christ, neither a slave nor a blue-collar worker nor a woman need feel any “lesser status” within the body. Of course, ministry tasks and responsibilities may differ (cf. 1 Tim. 2-3; Tit. 1-2), but as brothers and sisters together, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and as co-laborers in the body, there is no distinction. This teaching was vital to the New Testament church.

### UNITY, NOT DISTINCTION!

One of the basic skills many of us picked up as children was the ability to major in the minors. Whether it was in comparisons of Christmas presents, the number of peas or green beans on the plate, or “who-stayed-up-the-latest-last-night,” we specialized in matters of distinction, not unity. Yet the opposite is stressed in the New Testament, and the opposite is to be true of New Testament saints.

### **Acts 15:7b–11**

*Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.*

In the Jerusalem Council the apostles and elders came together to consider the challenge of the false teachers concerning the addition of circumcision and the Law of Moses to the work of the Spirit in the

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Body of Christ. This was no small threat, for in it was the distortion of the very gospel of God. It is a delight to see the apostle Peter step to the forefront in the controversy. Peter, who had struggled with this whole knotty issue himself (cf. Acts 10; Gal. 1), now spoke on behalf of the Gentiles. Of interest to us is Peter's emphasis on two things.

*God made no distinction between Jew and Gentile, for he purified their hearts by faith.* After Peter's struggles with the vision of the sheet (Acts 10) and the favoritism exhibited in the assembly at Jerusalem, following a visit from James (Gal. 2:11-13), he addressed the Council with the enthusiasm and clarity that came from the lessons he had learned. Peter had come to grips with the reality and character of the Body of Christ. He realized God's greatest concern was, and is, the heart (Acts 15:8a). The tool of distinctionism had really become the lathe of legalism—merely an excuse for cutting and dividing according to arbitrary and external biases.

In matters of the inner man or the spiritual plight of a man without the Savior, God's concern is for the heart. When the heart was right with God, then there was no continuing distinction. It is hardly surprising that there is no distinction in Christ. To consider a bias for one group of believers or another is to bring defect to the holy and complete work of salvation (cf. Rom. 3:22).

*It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as those in the New Testament church were.* Additionally, based on the reality of a distinctionless salvation in Christ, Peter gave the faithful saying of the apostles and Council concerning salvation. It is the work of grace that leads to salvation (Eph. 2:8-10). The important phrase "just as they are" in the Acts passage settles the issue. It proclaims equality of spiritual heritage and benefit to both Jew and Gentle. Peter's ability to understand this revelation from God became the platform for his understanding of the issues that threatened the church. Would to God that the church of our day could lay issues of doctrine and controversy on the "councilor table" for biblical evaluation.



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### **1 Corinthians 3:21-23**

*So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.*

The church at Corinth faced many unique challenges. As an assembly, it had an abundance of spiritual gifts exhibited in the lives of the members (1:7). They were benefactors of an extended and godly ministry given to them by the apostle Paul, who served in humility and wisdom (2:1-5). Yet there were divisions and factions among them (1:10-12). Paul develops the first section of his epistle along lines of concern and instruction concerning those matters.

Rather than boasting about the ministries and abilities of man, be they Peter, Paul, or Apollos, the Corinthians were to retrench according to the reality of their true possessions and characteristics in Christ. These believers had been abundantly blessed. All the servants of God who had ministered to them belonged to them. All matters to time or possessions, things present or things to come, belonged to them corporately. Why? Because “you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”

### UNITY, NOT STATUS

One of the more amusing times of the academic year for John is commencement. In one sense it is certainly a time of joy and encouragement as hundreds of men and women fulfill a curricular regime and move on into fields of service and further study. Yet, for John, it is also amusing.

Here he is in an incredibly ridiculous robe—with a multicolored hood that threatens to restrict his windpipe, sleeves that he could use to store his lunch, and a cap that has absolutely no utility short of supporting a tassel that keeps dislodging his contacts. Further,

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many things about the ceremony—the academic credentials, the clothing, the separated seating—wear away at the careful truths of the New Testament concerning relationships with others in the Body of Christ. Maybe a commencement address on the brotherhood of believers would help.

### **Matthew 23:8–12**

*But you are not to be called “Rabbi,” for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth “father,” for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called “teacher,” for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*

If there remained any doubt concerning the essential character of the church as a community of brothers and sisters redeemed and now seen as “on in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28d), a brief reminder of our Lord’s words to His disciples settles the matter. In the context of both defining true greatness in the kingdom (Matt. 23:11-12; cf. 10:20-28) and contrasting that servant model with the conduct of the religious leaders of His day, Christ reaffirmed the unity and oneness that composes the soil for the true roots of the kingdom.

*For you have only one Master, and you are all brothers.* In keeping with the honor and prestige, not to mention the tassels and thrones reserved for the members of the Sanhedrin, the disciples deferred to the customs and thoughts of their day by attaching titles of esteem to those who were the teachers of the law. Christ took issue with that practice and said rather that the disciples were to look at no disciple as greater than another. They were all equally brothers, and commonly looked to the one Master, their Father in heaven. This emphasis provides the backdrop for the church’s leadership model.

**James 2:1–5**

*My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers; Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?*

If Matthew 23 describes those who are thinking “too highly” of themselves, James 2 describes those who are thinking “too lowly” of others. James and the Spirit of God move quickly to essential issues and inconsistencies in the early church—matters that need careful definition in order to continue God’s work among the young community of believers.

The inconsistency of favoritism brought a quick response from James. James’s immediate audience was showing preferential treatment of the rich over the poor in the local assembly. Such behavior, James states, is entirely inappropriate from a number of perspectives. First, it is a misunderstanding of the frailty and temporary nature of wealth (1:9-11). Second, it betrays personal judgments motivated by evil intent (2:4). Third, and most significant, it misses the essential work that poorness, or difficult circumstances, has in the life of the believer (2:5; cf. 1:2-4).

Yet woven skillfully through this theological tapestry are the important threads concerning equality within the Body of Christ. (James does refer to his readers repeatedly as “brothers and sisters” [1:2, 9, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14-15]). Further, James reminds his readers

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that in judging their poor brethren they were sinfully demanding a legal standard of perfection (2:8-11).

But most significant, to promote any feature of favoritism among the assembly was to deny the truth of their own salvation. James states that their heavenly Father, who is generous to all (1:5) and does not change (1:17) chose “to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created” (1:18). The point to the readers was unmistakable. It was God who gave grace abundantly and *evenly* to all the saints. His grace to them, as well as to James himself, was to result in their being held up *together* to the Lord as firstfruit from His harvest (cf. Deut. 26:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:20-23).

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The now famous Lucy and Linus, from the children’s cartoon strip *Peanuts*, are gazing out their windows, watching the rain pour down. With a deep sigh, Lucy laments, “Boy, look at it rain. What if it floods the whole world?”

Linus quickly responds, “It will never do that. In the ninth chapter of Genesis God promised Noah that it would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.”

“You’ve taken a great load off my mind,” Lucy replies. To which Linus responds, “Sound theology has a way of doing that!” Similarly, sound theology in the church—understanding who we actually are in Christ’s Body—brings theological relief in relation to questions of what we are to do in the church. Ephesians 4 contains one of the classic blueprints for ministry in the New Testament.

Character leads to conduct. Relationship leads to responsibility. Doctrine leads to duty. So it is in Ephesians 4:1-16. That passage presents the flesh and blood of New Testament ministry in the church. It is a picture of body growth and of the unique and supernatural nurture of lives in the supportive and cooperative atmosphere of a

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local assembly. It is divided into three paragraphs. Each contributes a key feature of the ministry and leads to the following concepts.

### THE COMMITMENT OF UNITY (4:1–6)

Building on the established truths of Ephesians 3:6, the apostle now reaffirms the intimate relationship between who we are and what we do. Believers are one, not only through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ but also because this essential unity is seen in the very character of God Himself.

*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4-6).*

In rereading all of Paul’s epistles, one can find that subject of unity mentioned more often than any other. It is time for candid acknowledgement of this in the Christian church.

It is hardly wavering toward liberalism to reaffirm the preoccupation of God the Spirit and the apostle Paul concerning the character and conduct of the Body of Christ. Such an emphasis is foundational to Pauline theology.

Second, the very source and substance of our salvation, God Himself, is infinitely more interested in our understanding the concept of unity in the body than we are. Cultivating “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (4:3) is exactly consistent with the God we love and serve.

Third, unity is not automatic. This may seem readily apparent, yet Paul made a special point of reminding the Ephesians that they were “to make every effort” in pursuing these objectives of unity and peace in the assembly. These words paint a picture of a miner who is laboring hard in his work for the reward of small but valuable

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gems. In the same way, the believer who labors hard in the work of unity is commended by God.

### THE CONTRIBUTION OF DIVERSITY (4:7–10)

Paul continues in precisely the same way as the chapter began. He reaffirms the truth of our salvation that we are benefactors of grace by God’s grace and initiative. Earlier Paul had written that we were to live “worthy of the calling you have received” (4:1). Now he states that “to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (4:7). Whatever our ministry opportunities or abilities, they are no cause for boasting as if we have influenced the portion of grace God has given us.

The grace ministry of Christ has brought gifts and distributions to the church. The foundation of the structure has already been laid:

*Consequently, you are...members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:19-20).*

This diversity of gifts and the careful understanding and exercise of them complements the unity of the body. The commitment to unity is a sameness that keeps members of the body as a unit during growth and maturing pains, and their unique exercise of gifts complements and encourages the body in a multifaceted way equal to the various needs and interests of any local assembly. Here we see unity in purpose and diversity in function.

### THE CONDUCT OF BRINGING BELIEVERS TO MATURITY (4:11–16)

The church as a living organism is alive and vitally rooted in the grace of Christ. But a ministry dilemma remains. The church exists,

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both corporately and individually, in immature form. It is made up of young believers who need to profit from the lives of other saints for the mutual growth of the body. The real labor of the ministry is seen in this passage. There can be no more worthy purpose for the believer than the investing of his life in the lives of others to bring them to maturity. All structures and philosophies of ministry come back to this watershed passage, and others like it, which insist on spiritual maturity as the goal for our work and life together.

As before, we can see three vital emphases in this passage. First, the reason God has given a diversity of grace-gifts to the Body is so that God's people can be prepared for works of service and that the Body of Christ may be corporately built up to the unity and maturity that reflects the fullness of Christ.

*To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:12-13).*

As one old saint once said, "It's amazin' what you can learn about the Bible by just reading it!" The Scriptures are patently clear. The work of the ministry is people—people who labor at the long-range goals of seeing brothers and sisters established in good works which is to be the result of our salvation (cf. Eph. 2:10) and in unity and maturity within the Body of Christ.

But what is the structure of this corporate unity? There is no greater unity than "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ," based on a mature understanding of doctrine. There is no reason to be hesitant about doctrine. The greatest sources of unity in the body come at the doctrinal level (cf. Acts 2:42). But it is equally true that mere doctrine is not the end goal—people are. The umbrella of acceptance in the body must go beyond doctrinal precision.

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Two passages illustrate this life-changing truth about the place of doctrine. In that remarkable little thank-you note for contributions from the saints, Paul writes:

*It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry...out of selfish ambition...supposing that they can stir up trouble for me....The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached (Phil. 1:15-18).*

Notice how Paul refused to speak words of condemnation or judgment against believers who he knew were ministering out of motives not strictly Christ-centered. He allowed no negative ministry-motives to deter him from his joy and delight in the work of the gospel.

The second passage is equally remarkable:

*All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you (Phil. 3:15).*

Paul now backs away from the heavy-handed approach to convincing others of his (and God's) point of view. Rather, he allows for the process of maturity to be finished in the lives of saints who may disagree (with this revelation), and he expects that in God's timing those truths will be established in them. In matters both of ministry motives and doctrinal precision, relationships in the body come first.

Second, the entire pattern is one that sees that individual believer progressing from infancy to adulthood.

*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in*



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*all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ*  
(Eph. 4:14-15).

Immaturity is characterized by doctrinal vacillation. Maturity is characterized by one whose growth and life is increasingly “into him who is the Head.” But how? Notice the critical phrase at the beginning of 4:15. In our English text it reads, “Speaking the truth in love.” It can be literally rendered “Truthing in love.” This refers to the individual parts of the Body of Christ who commit themselves to a dual ministry. Truth without love leads to harshness, and love without truth leads to an absence of standards. The whole of Christian ministry in the New Testament is summarized in the phrase “Indeed, even Christ Himself is the fullness of grace and truth” (John 1:16-17). In other words, the responsibility of growth in the body rests squarely on the shoulders of believers who commit themselves to this “truthing in love” in life and relationships.

Paul selected his words carefully here. The seedplot for body growth is the loving, gentle, nurturing of love (*agape*) on the ground of doctrinal truth. Rather than using *phileo*, which means brotherly affection, or *stergo*, which mean mutual respect, or *eros*, which means principally craving or physical desire, Paul used *agape* to represent what love is. The word has been carefully used in Ephesians:

- 1:4 The electing love of God that selected us as saints in eternity past
- 2:4 The merciful, gracious love of God that granted us salvation while we were spiritually dead
- 3:17-18 The dimensionless wealth of the love of Christ bringing us to the fullness of God

Now, in 4:15 this live (*agape*), modeled by Christ, is defined

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as “the generous choosing of the interest of another over oneself.” It is the determined decision to seek the interests of others who are regarded as brothers and sisters in the faith. We are “rooted and established in love” (3:17; cf. 1 Tim. 1:5). Nurture and growth for a believer happens when love and truth are coupled carefully in one life and then in many lives in the church, so that the whole body will “grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (4:15b). Then the promise of body growth and the proper working of each part will be accomplished.

Our third observation about these texts continues this point most forcefully:

*From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (4:16).*

As each believer labors personally in areas of truth and love, the text promises that Christ Himself will coordinate those parts into a whole that is cooperative, co-supportive, and expressed by love. Now we see that not only does each believer do his part, but that edification and growth in the body can be accomplished only when the body is working together. In our individualized Western society, this concept is a splash of cold water. Essentially then, our unity in God Himself, coupled with the diverse abilities within the body, is in final composite form, to resemble a body—fitted and formed by all its parts working together (held together by the glue of maturity) and clothed in the attribute of love. This imagery speaks forcefully and magnificently to the issue of the proper conduct of the church in our day.

### CONCLUSIONS

In each paragraph of this important scripture section on Christian ministry, a principle is given that leads to a promise.

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	PRINCIPLE	PROMISE
Eph. 4:1-6	Commitment to Unity	“One God...who is over all” (4:6)
Eph. 4:7-13	Complement of Giftedness	“Attaining to...the fullness of Christ” (4:13)
Eph. 4:14-16	Concern for Body Growth	“Grow up into...Christ... and...in love” (4:15-16)

Together they constitute a blueprint for Christian ministry, each part vital to the makings of the whole. Thus we can say that the focus of Christian ministry is that *God's law of growth is unity, diversity, and bringing men to maturity in love*. In any study of Christian ministry and the church, these principles must be central theses and commitments of a local assembly.

The farmer reminds us of the importance of starting out carefully. If in a field or garden your first rows are not straight, that affects the layout of your entire farming enterprise. So it is with understanding Christian ministry in the church. The first rows are most important. If we can accurately establish what is the essential character of the church, we have uncovered the foundation for our study, which will lend itself to a stable and sound structure for building a biblical philosophy of ministry. The rows of the character and conduct of the church will produce a harvest of Christian ministry.

Yet competitors and counterfeits abound. Our modern ministry theory and practice offers man systems of evaluation that press against the character of the church. Initially we can say that any theory or view, any group or ministry emphasis, any denomination or parachurch concern, any method or practice that pulls at the fabric of the unity and oneness of the Body of Christ is suspect and to be weeded out. Regardless of past activities and traditions, institutionalized or not, our standard must always go back to those first rows that see every believer as “one in Christ Jesus,” and each saint doing his part as the body “builds itself up in love!”

Now for the rest of the field!

