



RESOUNDING FAITH | MULTIPLYING MINISTRY

November 17, 2024

In the 2023 book “The Great Dechurching,” authors Jim Davis and Michael Graham report on a study they conducted that suggests that 40 million Americans who used to attend church at least once a month now attend less than once a year. And that means that 15% of American adults effectively no longer go to church. They have dechurched. I recently interviewed Michael Graham as part of the Resound Project podcast, so you can hear the episode when it is posted later this week. But in that episode, Michael Graham offers a number of important insights.

One of the ideas he shared is that not everyone who has de-churched is leaving the church for the same reasons. So he talks about how some people have left church for what he calls casual reasons, meaning they didn't intend to stop, it just sort of happened. Maybe they moved to a new city and just didn't get around to finding a new church community. Or maybe they're a young professional who prioritized their career, or a young family that prioritized Sunday sports and activities, and therefore they're quite open to an invitation to attend a new church if they found one that they liked and it worked with their schedule. So there are some who have left the church for casual reasons.

But then Michael also suggests that there are some people who have left the church because of genuine pain, and as a result of that pain, they no longer feel like they can trust the institution of the church or its leaders, and of course, we should have nothing but compassion for those who have experienced pain within a church context.

Some of the reasons for that growing distrust among some people when it comes to the church as an institution are new, and they're the result of church members and church leaders behaving very, very badly. Some of the things that we have witnessed in recent decades are beyond anything earlier Christians could have even imagined. At the same time, some of the problems that we see within a church have been with us from the very beginning of the early Christian movement for the simple reason that every church, without exception, is filled with messed up, broken, flawed human beings — beginning with yours truly. So there is no perfect church. Every church is filled with messed up, broken, flawed human beings. If by some miracle you were able to find the perfect church, you do realize that the very moment that you step into it, it wouldn't be perfect anymore. Every church is filled up with flawed human beings.

We might assume that the early Church, among that first generation of Christians, was pristine and pure, and then everything went downhill from there. But one of the most striking features of the New Testament is that problems arose right from the very beginning. In almost all of his letters, Paul is addressing some kind of conflict or controversy, and in an odd kind of way, that can be sort of encouraging, because at

least it shows us we're not the only ones. And though it is subtle, that is the theme of this brief little passage that is before us today.

We're in a series focused on Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. As we've seen, Paul started a new church community in the large seaport city of Thessalonica, but then, very quickly, he was forced to leave because he faced opposition to the message of the gospel. And now, after several months, he writes a letter, not only to address the specific questions and concerns that the Thessalonians had, but also to encourage them to continue to multiply their ministry even after he is gone. So what I'd like us to do is take a look at this brief little section toward the end of the letter where Paul advises the Thessalonians and us, by extension, about how we should relate to three different groups of people. He gives us instructions on how to relate to 1) *our leaders*, 2) *one another*, and 3) *the world around us*.

¹²We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Our Leaders

First, Paul addresses how we should relate to our leaders. Now, historically speaking, the British Pastor John Stott said that the Church has often oscillated between two extremes: between clericalism on the one hand and anti-clericalism on the other.

Clericalism

Clericalism occurs when we expect the pastors or the ministry leaders, the clergy, to do all the work, and they might do that in an authoritarian way with a dictatorial style. Or it may be that we put our ministry leaders up on a pedestal, and we give them excessive amounts of deference, and that may be what contributes to celebrity culture within churches. But either way, the net result is that no one else within the congregation has the opportunity to identify, to cultivate, and to use their gifts to contribute to the work of ministry.

Anti-Clericalism

But it's also possible to overreact in the opposite direction and to embrace anti-clericalism. Someone might cite Paul's teaching on the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12, for example, Paul says there's one body with many members, and all the members have an indispensable role to play within the ministry of the church. But it's possible to over-press that analogy and conclude that therefore we don't need any pastors or ministry leaders. We're better off without them, so let's get rid of them. But of course, what could happen in that situation then is that the community devolves into chaos. It becomes a free-for-all where it's not the wisest voice but rather the loudest voice that wins.

So somehow we've got to figure out how to strike the balance that Paul is talking about in Ephesians 4:11-12. For me this became something of a theme verse for ministry when I was first ordained almost 20 years ago, because in Ephesians 4, Paul

says God has given the church pastors and teachers. To do what? To do all the work? No. He's given the church pastors and teachers to *equip the saints* to do the work of ministry. In other words, God doesn't give the church pastors and teachers to do all the work but rather to equip the saints — all God's people — to do God's work together.

Someone once made this joke about the Church, likening it to a football game. If you were to go to a football game, you would likely see 22 people on the field desperately in need of rest, and you would also see thousands of people in the stands desperately in need of exercise. And that's how it often works within the church context. We might observe 22 people who are exhausted doing all the work, and there are thousands or maybe hundreds of people who could really use the opportunity to exercise their gifts. So somehow we have to figure out how to strike that balance, because Christianity is meant to be a participatory sport. We're not supposed to be spectators; we're supposed to be participants. We're not supposed to be merely consumers of God's love and grace, but rather we're supposed to be producers of God's love and grace in the lives of others.

So with that in mind, let's stop and consider what exactly was going on in Thessalonica when Paul wrote to the Christians there. On the one hand, it's sort of surprising that Paul refers to leaders at all, because these people had only been Christians for a very short time. This church had only been in existence for a matter of months, and yet we know from the book of Acts that Luke refers to at least two specific leaders in Thessalonica by name: Aristarchus and Secundus. So what's the issue? Well based on what Paul writes here, it's possible that these leaders felt disrespected in some way. But it's also possible that perhaps they provoked that reaction by being a little too heavy-handed. We don't exactly know. What we do know is that God wants every church to have pastors who shepherd the flock, but their job is not to monopolize the ministry but rather to multiply the ministry.

So specifically Paul instructs the Thessalonians to respect their leaders, to hold them in the highest regard in love. Why? He goes on to explain that there are three things that our leaders are supposed to do.

Labor Among Us

The first is to labor, to work hard. So he says, we urge you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor, who work hard among you. Now you might be thinking to yourself, well that's strange that Paul says that, because we all know, don't we, that pastors only work one day a week, and even then, isn't it kind of a half-day? So it's a little surprising that he's saying that we work hard. But actually, the word that Paul uses here is a word that, more often than not, is used to describe manual labor. And that would have been especially striking in the ancient world, as we mentioned before, because ancient Greeks did not value manual labor. They considered it to be degrading, beneath them. It was something reserved for slaves. And yet Paul says that that's what ministry is like. Some days it might be calm and peaceful as you're spending the majority of your time in prayer or Bible study, but most of the time it's not like that. Most of the time it's like manual labor. So it changes our very conception of what ministry is like. It's not necessarily a walk in the park. It might be like digging

ditches in the blazing sun. And so Paul suggests that we should expect our leaders to toil and strive, as Paul did — with all the energy that God inspires within me, he says.

Are Over Us In the Lord

So first, our leaders are supposed to labor, but then Paul says respect them, those who are over you in the Lord. Are over you in the Lord? That doesn't sound so good. We don't like the sound of that, especially as Americans. Paul said something similar to the elders in Ephesus in Acts 20, where he says the Holy Spirit has made them overseers of the Church of God, which he obtained by his own blood. But we're uncomfortable with the idea of anybody being over us because we all know how power, position, and authority can be abused. And that's why we have to remember that Paul uses a very important qualifier here. He describes leaders as those who are over you *in the Lord*. What does it mean to oversee others in the Lord?

I wonder if you know the place in Mark 10 where two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, come up to Jesus, and they're jockeying for position. They're trying to get ahead of the other disciples. And so they say, look, Jesus, will you promise us the two most important cabinet positions in your new administration? Will you give us the right to sit at your right and your left? We want to be your number one and your number two go-to people when you come into power. And when the other disciples find out that James and John have made this request of Jesus, they are ticked off. Why are they ticked off? Because they asked the question? No, because they asked the question *first*. They're like, ah, he beat us to the punch! That was the best thing they could have asked! But how does Jesus respond?

Jesus says, you guys have no idea what you're talking about. Yes, there is a leadership structure within the Kingdom of God, but it is inverted, and those who are at the top are those who assume a position of service at the bottom. And he says, just look at me. I'm the son of man, the eternal Son of God, and I have come not to be served but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many. So if you want to become great, you have to become small. You have to follow me along the path of sacrifice and service, giving your life away for the good of others.

Admonish Us

So Paul tells us that our leaders should be respected because of their labor, their hard work, because they are over us in the Lord, but then he says they are also those who admonish us. On the one hand, it's important that pastors are not supposed to give their opinions to people. If we are admonishing someone, warning someone, we're really just applying the Scriptures to their lives. It's God who admonishes us through His Word. Think about what Paul says in 1 Timothy 4: All scripture, he says, is breathed out by God, and it's profitable for what? For teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the person of God might be complete, equipped for every good work. So the purpose of the Scriptures, at times, is to correct us, to reprove us, but it's really God doing the work through his Word. It's not really us. We're not supposed to be offering our own personal opinions; we're simply supposed to help people understand their own life situation in light of God's Word.

Nevertheless, what that does mean is that pastors, at least sometimes, are called to challenge as well as comfort, to warn as well as console. I have to say, by personality,

by temperament, I don't really like that. I don't really like being in a position where I have to tell someone no, or I have to deliver a message that's hard to hear. I don't like disappointing people. I don't like letting people feel let down. I'd much rather just tell people they can have whatever they want, and I just want to try to make them happy. But what Paul is saying is that it doesn't work that way, because that would be a dereliction of duty. Sometimes we have to admonish. Sometimes we have to warn one another. Why? Because it's the loving thing to do. So if you see that someone is headed down the wrong path, the most loving thing to do is to warn them. Now you can't control how they'll respond. You can't control the outcome, but you can at least offer a warning in love.

One Another

So here Paul encourages us to respect our leaders and to hold them in high esteem in love because of their labor and hard work, as they oversee and sometimes even admonish the flock. But second, how are we supposed to relate to one another? What Paul tells us is: Be at peace among yourselves.

Now just think about that. Why did Paul have to say that? Why did Paul have to write those words to this new church in Thessalonica? Well, he wrote it because he knew there was the potential for conflict. Here we have a brand new church at the beginning of the early Christian movement at around 50AD, and yet right there, from the beginning, conflict is already an issue. You know why? Because whenever human beings are involved, conflict is inevitable. So the question is not whether or not conflict will arise, but rather what are we supposed to do when it does? And what Paul tells us is that we have to be at peace among ourselves.

Jesus gave us very clear instructions about biblical peacemaking in Matthew 5 and 18. And if you put those two together, essentially what Jesus is telling us is that whether you are the offended party or the offending party, the best thing that you can do is directly go to the other person, one-to-one, immediately, bring a friend along with you if you need to, in order to address the concern and to seek to reconcile the issues so that you can resolve the conflict as soon as possible. So in Matthew 5, for example, Jesus says look, if you're in the act of worship and then all of a sudden you remember or realize, oh, there's someone who has something against me — I've offended somebody in some way — what should you do? Jesus says stop. Stop what you're doing and immediately go and speak with the other person one-to-one. Be reconciled, and then come back to worship. So if you just remembered you have to reconcile with somebody, get up and leave! That's what Jesus is encouraging us to do. But then in Matthew 18, he says if someone sins against you, before you do anything else, before you say anything else to anyone else, then what you need to do is go and tell the other person directly. Between just you and the other person alone, explain what it is that they've done wrong. And again, if you need someone else to go along with you, ask a friend. But the goal is to be reconciled. And if you do, you might just win the relationship back.

So that's how we learn how to extend and to receive forgiveness — to pursue reconciliation— so that we might be at peace among ourselves. Then Paul goes on to give a number of short little instructions in verse 14. Now you may have noticed that over the last several weeks, whenever I've read the word "brothers," I would also add

the word “sisters.” And why is that? I wasn’t playing fast and loose with the Scriptures in order to be inclusive. The reason why I did that is because that’s what the root word in Greek actually means. This is the word *Adelphoi*, which is usually translated as “brothers,” but it’s like the English word “mankind.” When we speak of mankind, it’s inclusive of both men and women. That’s true of *Adelphoi* in ancient Greek as well. It was inclusive of men and women. So whenever we see that word “brothers,” we can assume we’re talking about brothers *and* sisters. Paul is talking about the whole Christian community — all those who are committed to following Jesus.

Now most commentators agree that these short, pithy instructions in verse 14 refer back to earlier sections of the letter. We’ve talked about how Paul responded to some of the specific questions and concerns the Thessalonians had (as reported back to him from his colleague Timothy) because, Timothy reported, they were confused about a number of topics. They were confused about work, they were confused about death, and they were confused about sex. And now Paul is referring back to all that earlier material in the letter. So when he says, “admonish the idle,” he is referring to those who gave up their jobs and stopped working. They became idle. So Paul says, admonish them. Tell them to get back to work. When he says, “encourage the faint-hearted,” he’s referring to those who are grieving the loss of a loved one who had recently died, either a family member or a friend. So he’s saying, encourage those who are faint of heart by reminding them of the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. And when he says, “help the weak,” he’s referring to those who are struggling to resist sexual temptation. So he’s saying, come alongside them, support them, help the weak so that they can continue to fight the good fight. And then Paul adds, whatever anyone might be struggling with, be patient with them all. So he emphasizes, be at peace with one another and be patient with one another, regardless of what it is that you might be struggling with. Then in conclusion, he says, see to it that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but seek to do good to one another.

The World Around Us

So as to our leaders, we’re supposed to respect them, hold them in high regard in love because of their work for the sake of the gospel. And as to one another, we’re supposed to be at peace with one another and be patient with one another. But notice, Paul doesn’t just want us to do good to one another but to *everyone*. So as to the world around us, Paul wants us to strive to do good to everyone. And why is that? Because Paul knows that internal division and external strife are the two things that would prevent the gospel from continuing to sound forth, and he doesn’t want anything to stop the gospel from resounding from this church in Thessalonica so that everyone everywhere might discover that the living and true God has made himself known in the person of Jesus. Paul’s greatest concern, now that he’s left this great city, is that they would continue to multiply their ministry even in his absence.

The question then for us is, how do we become people like this? How do we become a community like this? And the answer is that we have to continue to work the gospel into our heart and into our lives. The gospel is not just the message that enables us to become Christians; it’s the gospel that enables us to continue to grow as Christians. So we have to apply it in a myriad of ways to understand it — to come into a deeper, richer experience of His grace — so that by the power of the gospel we might be

transformed from the inside out, so that we might progressively become more and more like Jesus.

I think few people understood this better than Victor Hugo, the author of “Les Misérables,” which he wrote in 1862. Now I read this book for the first time before I ever saw the Broadway show, the summer after I graduated from high school. I was 18 years old. And I remember that the portrait in particular of Bishop Bienvenue left an indelible mark in my own mind. It gave me a conception of what it means to be in ministry.

You may know the story. Jean Valjean has been released from prison after fulfilling a 19-year sentence. But he’s given this yellow passport that marks him off as being an ex-convict, and as a result no one is willing to help him or take him in, until he meets this Bishop, Bishop Bienvenu, who provides him with food and a place to sleep. He gives him a bed with crisp, clean, white linens to sleep in. And when he serves him a meal, he uses his finest silverware. And in fact, when he notices that the room is growing a little dark, he calls for two silver candlesticks to be brought in to illumine the room. But how does Jean Valjean repay the Bishop for his kindness? Well, he robs him in the middle of the night. They get in a scuffle, and he shoves them to the ground, and then he steals all the silverware and heads into the night. But the next day, the police run into Jean Valjean. They find the silverware on him, and so they drag him back to the Bishop’s house. And now the Bishop has one of two choices: He can condemn Valjean for what he has done, which will send him back to prison, this time likely for life. Or he can choose to forgive. And to the astonishment of Valjean, he not only forgives, he justifies him. He declares him not guilty. And he explains to the incredulous police — and the even more incredulous Valjean — that he was surprised that when he took the silverware, he didn’t also take the candlesticks, because the candlesticks were worth far more than all the silverware together, and he intended him to take it all as a gift. (Now, by the way, I shared this story about 10 years ago, and shortly thereafter, someone actually stole our brass candlesticks. So if you need them, take them. But if you need help, it might be better to just ask. You can ask; we’ll be happy to speak with you.)

But the Bishop forgives. He gives Valjean a new lease on life. And this is what the Bishop says after the police have departed. Hugo writes,

“My friend,” resumed the Bishop, “before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them.”

He stepped to the chimney-piece, took the two silver candlesticks, and brought them to Jean Valjean ... [who] was trembling in every limb. He took the two candlesticks mechanically, and with a bewildered air.

“Now,” said the Bishop, “go in peace. By the way, when you return, my friend, it is not necessary to pass through the garden. You can always enter and depart through the street door. It is never fastened with anything but a latch, either by day or by night”...

Jean Valjean was like a man on the point of fainting. The Bishop drew near to him, and said in a low voice:--

"Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man."

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless. The Bishop had emphasized the words when he uttered them. He resumed with solemnity:--

"Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."

Now look at this Bishop. Here you have a church leader, a minister of the gospel, who understands that there is a leadership structure within the Kingdom of God, but it is inverted — that those who are at the top must assume a position of service at the bottom. He's following Jesus along the path of sacrifice and service, and emulating Jesus by extending grace. And the grace that he extends to Valjean doesn't just change this man's life once by letting him off the hook and giving him a new opportunity to pursue his future; no, this act of grace continues to transform him throughout his life.

The genius of the novel is that Valjean has those candlesticks continue to appear throughout the story. And whenever Valjean sees the candlesticks, he's reminded of that day — that day when he received his life back, that day when the Bishop showered his grace upon him. And every time he remembers that moment, that's what empowers him. That's what motivates him to want to become different, to change, to become like the Bishop himself. It's that grace that transforms him from the hardened criminal to an honest man of self-giving love. And you see, that's how it is for us, because Jesus came among us as the one and only Son of God, the Son of Man, and yet he did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. He says to all of us, "My life for yours."

You see, for us, it's not candlesticks; it's the cross. It's the cross that showcases God's grace to us. And so every time we look at the cross, we're reminded not only of the fact that Jesus forgave us on the cross, not only that he declared us not guilty — even though we are — because he absorbed our debt, but rather every time we look at the cross, we are continually transformed more and more into the image of Jesus. Because when we work his love and grace deeper and deeper into our heart and into our lives, when we allow ourselves to be melted in the lavishness of his love, that's what motivates and inspires us to be different. You see, it's his grace that transforms and changes us from the inside out so that we become more like Jesus himself — so that we too might choose to walk down that path of sacrifice and service and emulate Jesus by extending grace to one another. And that is how Jesus multiplies his ministry to the world around us, through us.

Let me pray for us.

Father, we thank you for these words from the apostle Paul to the Thessalonians, and we pray that you would help us to take them and make them our own. Help us to respect those leaders that you have placed in our lives, to hold them in high esteem in love, and help us to be at peace with one another and to be patient with one another. Help us to ensure that we do not seek to repay evil for evil to anyone, but to do good to one another. And as it relates to the world around us, help us to do good to everyone, so that everyone everywhere might experience your grace for themselves and discover the transformative power of the gospel. Multiply our ministry despite our weakness and our failure, we pray in Jesus name. Amen.