

# PERSPECTIVE

JANUARY 2021



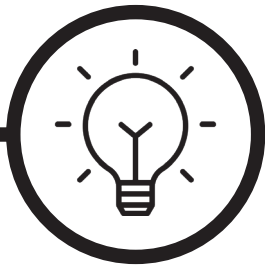
ARE YOU A  
WORLD  
CHRISTIAN?



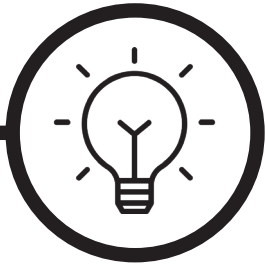
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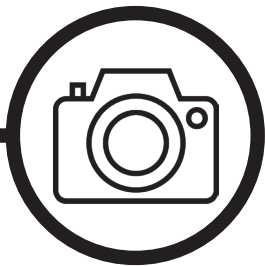
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## Are You A World Christian?

Did you ever watch *Miracle on 34th Street*? I don't remember the details, but the scene that always stood out to me is the one where the Santa who worked for Macy's sent cash-strapped parents to Gimbel's if the toy they wanted could be found there at a better price. We intuitively know that's how life should be. We experientially know it isn't. Whether it's toys, burgers, or cars, competition reigns supreme.

Unfortunately, competition sneaks into the church, too, at least in America where so many evangelical churches operate well within driving distance of each other. No one would ever be so crass as to say it, but at times it sure looks like churches compete for visitors. We beef up our children's ministry decorations, hipsterize our music, and publicize a compelling schedule of relevant events all with the hope of our church being the most attractive destination for seekers. Sure, it's all done in the name of reaching the unreached, but why does it so often feel like churches are trying to capture a larger share of the seeker market?

### MY PASTOR'S FUNNY PRAYER

When I was a young Christian, I'll never forget the way my pastor prayed for nearby churches in his pastoral prayer. I'd never heard that done before. He prayed those churches would thrive. At first, I found his prayers for other churches slightly amusing. Didn't he know if God answered that prayer it might mean people would pass our church for the one God chose to bless? That didn't seem to bother him at all.

When I became a pastor, I started doing the same thing (you've probably noticed that at Mount Vernon). It helpfully reminds me and others that we aren't the only church in town. Over the years people have noticed. I can't tell you how many times people have commented approvingly on this practice I learned so many years ago.

I'm a big believer in church planting. I want more churches, not fewer. I want solid churches on every street corner, even the corner across the street from ours. I want our city saturated with gospel-centered, Bible-believing, holiness-loving, God-honoring churches. If that means we need to plant, so be it!

However, seeing churches like this thrive in our city requires more than planting new churches. We need to come alongside established churches. A gardener shouldn't be faulted for wanting more flowers in his garden. He *can* be faulted for failing to water the wilting flowers. Sadly, we have neglected wilting churches in favor of planting new ones. Our individualistic age has infected the church—we tend to think a great

deal about ourselves and very little about others.

There is a better way. Let's call it "serving other churches." It's what I saw modeled when my pastor lifted up sister congregations to the Lord in prayer. It's what we've tried to do at Mount Vernon as we've entered into relationships with churches in our area.

My goal in this article is to convince you to make it a priority of serving other churches. In later articles, I'll go into more detail and give examples of how this might fit into your life. For now, I simply want to show you from the Bible that if you are a Christian you must have a heart not merely for your own church but other gospel-centered churches as well.

### THE PRAYER OF JESUS

John 17 is known as the King's high priestly prayer. Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven and asks his heavenly Father to glorify him (17:1). Jesus knows his earthly ministry is about to come to an end. The cross stands directly before him. Now is the time to get ready. Jesus has done a lot of teaching (17:8), but for the words to sink in and transform lives God's Spirit is going to have to work. Thus, Jesus prays. He asks the Father to preserve the faith of these fledgling believers (17:11). Trials will come and Jesus doesn't want any of them to fall away.

What may be most interesting about this prayer is the fact that Jesus prays for people not-yet-born. He prays for men and women who will one day exist and believe in him through God's Word (17:20).

For what does Jesus pray? Does he pray they'd have joy, peace, or boldness? No, at least not right here. At this moment, Jesus prays for one thing—he prays for unity.

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just 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 have sent me (17:21)."

Again, "those who will believe" are future disciples. Jesus is praying for all of them (all of us). He is interceding on behalf of Christians in every generation. In one fell swoop, our Lord offered up a prayer for believers from Pentecost until this very day.

Notice how they come to faith. It is "through their word." Our faith is in the promises of God's Word for his people; promises to make a people for himself, to regenerate, to justify, sanctify, and one day glorify a people. This "word" is the revelation of God and the foundation of his church. It's the gospel.

The fruit of faith is unity. That's where Jesus goes next. He prays that those who believe "may all be

one.” We are to be one in purpose and mission. We are to share the same gospel-based goals. We are to be jointly committed to evangelism and discipleship. The union we share is a life-changing kind of unity.

In case we had any question as to just how deep the unity is for which Jesus prays, he gives us an illustration. Jesus points to the unity of the Father and the Son: “just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.” The Father and the Son love one another with an unbreakable love. The Father and Son work together with a shared mission. The Father sent the Son to the cross, but the Son went willingly. They are united in their nature and they are united in their goal. This isn’t a shallow kind of unity. It’s not a “slap-on-a-happy-face” kind of unity. It’s the real deal. Our unity is to be as deep as the unity of the Godhead itself.

Finally, Jesus prays about the good such unity will produce. It has an evangelistic flavor: “so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Jesus wants the world to know he was sent by his Father on a divine mission to seek and save the lost. The world will be more inclined to believe this Good News if they see the saved living together in unity. Our unity becomes a testimony to the truth and power of the gospel itself. Unity is a foundation upon which gospel ministry can rest.

### IT TAKES A CHURCH

When we think of disciples, we tend to think of individuals: John, Deborah, Sally, and Joe. However, Jesus doesn’t distinguish between disciples. He simply says, “those who will believe in me.” Yes, we can be sure Jesus intends for individual disciples to be joined together in love and purpose with one another.

However, shouldn’t we also assume Jesus intended local churches to be united together in love and purpose too? After all, notice how many of the New Testament letters were written to individual churches (e.g., 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians) and how many were written to networks of churches (e.g., Romans, Galatians).

When we are saved, we are to be saved *into* a church. This is why baptism is a *church* ordinance. It is the responsibility of a local church to discern whether a profession of faith is credible, then baptize him or her upon that profession of faith. When you’re baptized, you’re baptized into a family. When you join a new church, the Lord is adding you to a new family. These are now your peeps, your brothers and sisters—the believers with whom you are united in a special way.

The local church becomes ground zero for our faith. This is where we live out all those “one-another” commands of Scripture. It takes a church to raise a Christian.

### A GLOBAL NETWORK

Local churches should not view themselves as isolated, autonomous islands. We may be independent in our ecclesiastical structure (the way our church government operates). In other words, I am *not* the pastor of the members of First Baptist Sandy Springs. Just because our churches are united doesn’t make me their pastor and it doesn’t make them my church members. Furthermore, other churches don’t have control over our church (this is a point over which denominations disagree—but that’s a topic for another article!).

Even though churches are autonomous in their operations, we ought not to be independent in our purpose—our mission is the same, the Great Commission. We are all to be about the business of making “disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28: 19).

Two believers working well together are like a tiny rock thrown into a pond—it leaves a small wave, barely noticeable. However, when two (or more) congregations work together, it’s more like a boulder being thrown into the pond—everyone from the shore sees the water roll. A local church is a wonderful gift from God to the world. A global network of churches is a force to be reckoned with.

Another analogy: when my brother and I walk down the street, nobody notices. But if I’m walking down the street with my parents, my wife and kids, a few aunts and uncles, and a bunch of cousins, heads are most certainly going to turn. Think of like-minded churches around the world like a large, extended family walking together in the same, head-turning parade.

When Jesus prayed for believers yet to be born, did he have churches in mind? I’m arguing he did! Jesus longed for future congregations to share in the unity he has with his heavenly Father. This unity was so important to our Savior he prayed for it not once but twice, in John 17:20–21 and John 17:22–23:

“The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

A family of churches, a global network of churches, is a beautiful witness to a watching world.

### A WORLD CHRISTIAN

In his book, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, New Testament theologian Don Carson warned against a kind of Christianity that separates churches from one

another. He saw churches building their own brands as if they could build their own kingdoms. They neglected the kind of blood-bought unity the Bible declares churches are to share. He saw a world increasingly connected technologically, but still separated culturally. Even worse, he saw Christians buying into this kind of independent thinking. Referring to contemporary currents, Carson argued:

“[M]any people are responding with increasing nationalism, sometimes with almost frightening ethnocentrism. Christians are not immune to these sweeping currents of thought. They, too, can be caught up in flag-waving nationalism that puts the interests of my nation or my class or my race or my tribe or my heritage above the demands of the kingdom of God. . . .

What we need, then, are world Christians—not simply American Christians or British Christians or Kenyan Christians, but world Christians. By “world Christians,” I am referring to Christians, genuine believers in the Lord Jesus Christ [whose] . . . allegiance to Jesus Christ is self-consciously set above all national, cultural, linguistic, and racial allegiance . . .

The church, of course, is the only institution with eternal significance. If anyone ought to transcend the limitations of merely temporal allegiances, then those who constitute the church should.”

By all means, I want Mount Vernon to plant churches in the months and years to come. However, if we are to be “world Christians” we need to care not only for reproducing from within our body but serving other bodies of Christ—locally and internationally. Our allegiance is to the King of kings and his kingdom is not limited to our neighborhood or nation.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

In the months ahead, I hope to unpack in greater detail how we see churches working together in the Bible and the world today. For now, you might be wondering what all of this means to you. Here are a few ideas:

- *Pray for other churches.* Consider jotting down the churches I pray for on Sunday morning and praying for them throughout the week. You could even send the pastor of one of these churches a note and let him know you are praying God would bless his ministry. That small act of kindness would be an encouraging reminder that Christ’s kingdom is so much larger than any one church.

- *Be more interested in world missions than you are in American politics.* There is nothing wrong with keeping track of national elections and legislation. We are to be good stewards of our vote. But are you aware of what it’s like to be a Christian in Saudi Arabia? Did you know that evangelical churches in Algeria have been forced underground? Do you realize the Chinese government is presently cracking down on any Christian gathering that isn’t sanctioned by the state? These are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our love and prayers for them in their distress signify our John 17 unity.
- *Examine our relationships with believers inside and outside the church.* Of course, we should strive to be good neighbors with everyone God has put in our sphere of influence. However, we ought to feel a special tug to be on good terms with our brothers and sisters in Christ. First and foremost, are you are a peacemaker within your local church? Second, are you working hard to get to know believers who live in your neighborhood or work in your office? These relationships are important. The unity you have with them is a small but powerful picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- *Learn about Mount Vernon’s efforts to serve other churches.* In 2021, we are going to spend some time teaching about the many partnerships we’ve entered into over the years. Whether it’s the Southern Baptist Convention, the Greater Atlanta Baptist Network, or the Pillar Network. These are in addition to the more organic relationships we have with churches through our Feed My Sheep conference and our many international partnerships. The key is seeing that all these relationships aren’t merely *incidental* to our Christian life. We are aiming to be unified as Jesus prayed for us so many years ago.

That scene from *Miracle on 34th Street* has stood out to me for so many years because it seemed so foreign, so unnatural. My pastor’s prayer for other churches stood out to me as well because I’d simply never seen it done before. Sadly, serving other churches is an overlooked spiritual discipline. It’s a discipline (and a grace) worth recovering if we are going to see God’s churches grow in the months and years ahead.

– Aaron Menikoff



## ***The Church: The Gospel Made Visible***

Written by Mark Dever

Have you heard the saying, “If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it’s a duck?” It means you can know what something is by its characteristics. Churches are the same. Some organizations claim to be a church but don’t meet the basic characteristics of a church. However, God gets to decide what the nature, purpose, and activities of a church are, not us. Thankfully, Mark Dever’s book, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* makes God’s description of the church both understandable and easy to apply.

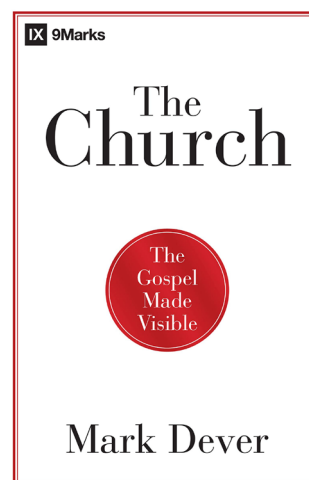
Dever examines what God says about the nature of the church by answering the question, “What is a church?”. Since God loves the church, Dever wants to make sure that we do not confuse the Bride of Christ with an impostor. By unpacking the attributes of the church (one, holy, universal, and apostolic) and the marks of a true church (the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the ordinances), Dever leaves no stone unturned in helping his reader understand the church better.

Dever then explains what the church is for. Is the church primarily about you or God? Most Christians would say the church is primarily for God, but are their churches oriented in a direction that makes that obvious? Dever explains from Scripture and church history how the worship of God, the edification of the church, and the evangelization of the world properly fulfills God’s calling on the church. No comfort can be found in this book for someone who seeks to abrogate their responsibility as a church member. Actually, Dever seems to trust that the Bible’s picture of the church will spur Christians towards greater faithfulness.

Lastly, Dever describes the biblically required activities for a church. He doesn’t shy away from tough topics like baptism, the qualifications for elders, and church discipline – nor should he. All the biblically required activities of the church are for our good. Dever knows this and seeks to encourage readers to faithfully be the church.

I cannot recommend this book enough. As Christians, we don’t want to *play* church or *do* church; we want to *be* the church. Indeed, we need to know God’s design of the church to fulfill the calling God has given us, and Dever’s book succinctly gives us that design.

– RECOMMENDED BY DANNY SANDERSON



### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

“This book attempts to provide such careful instruction so that we might understand and recover faithfulness to God’s Word on something that is not essential for salvation but that is both important and necessary for obedience—what the local church is to be and to do”  
— An Informal Introduction, p.xv

## 2

“By affirming the sufficiency of Scripture and the requisite role of faith in participating in the ordinances, we can conclude that a biblically faithful church is a protestant church.”  
— A Protestant Church, p.127

## 3

“The local church is more than a congregation, a gathering, but it is never less.”  
— A Gathered Church, p.132

## Gentle and Lowly

Written by Dane Ortlund

Who *is* Jesus? As Christians, we know there are dozens of biblically sound ways to answer. We often respond by calling out the works of Christ, and indeed these things are inextricably linked. But what of his heart? His very nature? How does he feel about and relate to his people? Again, who is he? In *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortlund answers this controlling question by looking at the very heart of Jesus. With clear dependence on Scripture, Ortlund unpacks the heart of Christ as if looking at a diamond, admiring it from many different angles.

Although we believe in the redeeming work of Christ on the cross, many of us are tempted to believe that God's patience with us wears thin as we continue to struggle against sin. In roughly 200 Scripture-saturated pages, Ortlund's examination reveals something quite different – Christ is gentle and lowly. This is his very heart, not a single aspect of his character, but the place in which he lives and from which he responds to his beloved people.

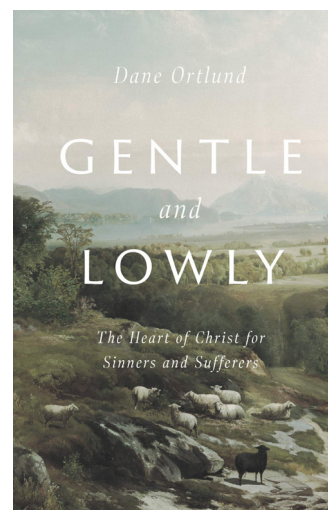
It is important to note that Ortlund does not emphasize the mercy of Christ by neglecting his wrath and justice. Rather, he says, "...the two rise and fall together. The more robust one's felt understanding of the just wrath of Christ...the more robust our felt understanding of his mercy."

*Gentle and Lowly* reveals how completely unlike us Jesus is. Our human minds can comprehend and even relate to the compassion of Christ in human suffering, but our natural response to sin (especially against us) is anger, retaliation, and revulsion. Yet, Ortlund explains that Christ's compassion is actually deepened in our sin. He is on our side *against* sin. Ortlund says, "When we sin, the very heart of Christ is drawn out to us."

Finally, it should be stressed that this is not who Christ is indiscriminately. His abundant compassion is reserved for those who belong to him, those who come to him. Ortlund says, "To those who are not his own, Jesus is a fearful judge...but for his own, Jesus himself endured that punishment."

I admit that I was initially skeptical before reading *Gentle and Lowly*. Often in our culture, I hear a false gospel that distorts the holiness, sovereignty, and just wrath of God. However, Ortlund explains that this gentle and lowly heart is the perfect expression of Christ's holiness, the perfect demonstration of his sovereignty, and the ultimate fulfillment of his just wrath poured out on Jesus for his children.

– RECOMMENDED BY NADINE EPPERSON



### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

"We are factories of fresh resistances to Christ's love. Even when we run out of tangible reasons to be cast out, such as specific sins or failures, we tend to retain a vague sense that, given enough time, Jesus will finally grow tired of us and hold us at arm's length."

– I Will Never Cast Out, p.63

## 2

"God's forgiving, redeeming, restoring touch reaches down into the darkest crevices of our souls, those places where we are most ashamed, most defeated. More than this: those crevices of sin are themselves the places where Christ loves us the most. His heart willingly goes there. His heart is most strongly drawn there. He knows us to the uttermost, and he saves us to the uttermost because his heart is drawn out to us to the uttermost. We cannot sin our way out of his tender care."

– To the Uttermost, p.83

## 3

"His heart for his own is not like an arrow, shot quickly but soon falling to the ground; or a runner, quick out of the gate, soon slowing and faltering. His heart is an avalanche, gathering momentum with time; a wildfire, growing in intensity as it spreads."

– To the End, p.203

# JANUARY

*These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!*

January 1 John. 2:1–12  
 January 2 Deuteronomy 30:15–20  
**January 3 1 John 1:1–4**  
 January 4 1 John 1:5–2:6  
 January 5 John 2:13–25  
 January 6 John 3:1–21  
 January 7 John 3:22–36  
 January 8 John 4:1–45  
 January 9 Psalm 32:1–7  
**January 10 1 John 1:5–2:6**  
 January 11 Psalm 113  
 January 12 Psalm 114  
 January 13 Psalm 115  
 January 14 Psalm 116  
 January 15 Psalm 117 & 118  
 January 16 Jude 15–25

**January 17 Psalm 113**  
 January 18 1 John 2:7–17  
 January 19 John 4:46–54  
 January 20 John 5:1–18  
 January 21 John 5:19–29  
 January 22 John 5:30–47  
 January 23 Psalm 18:16–30  
**January 24 1 John 2:7–17**  
 January 25 1 John 2:18–29  
 January 26 John 6:1–21  
 January 27 John 6:22–59  
 January 28 John 6:60–70  
 January 29 John 7:1–52  
 January 30 Psalm 71:12–24  
**January 31 1 John 2:18–29**

**\*Sermons in bold**

# TAKE UP & READ



# NEW MEMBERS

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Denis Garcia



Will Tuomey



*Mount Vernon*  
BAPTIST CHURCH