

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH:
PROMISE AND WARNINGS



SANTA BARBARA COMMUNITY CHURCH
SPRING/SUMMER 2006

SPRING / SUMMER CALENDAR

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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH: PROMISE AND WARNINGS

The New Testament is a collection of twenty–seven “books” or letters written to explain the life and mission of Jesus and to give direction to his followers. It is also the story of the church of Jesus Christ. In the beginning the church had no buildings, little direction and minimal structure. With the coming of the Holy Spirit this inept and fearful band of Jesus followers were transformed. Purpose, boldness, understanding and confidence began to permeate the first church in Jerusalem. As this new spiritual reality of forgiveness and new life in Christ was more fully understood, the people of God, the church, did what people do anywhere when they have discovered good news. They talked about it! The result was that more people believed in this Jesus. Many more! Acts 2 records the first sermon delivered by the apostle Peter. Two thousand people responded to the message that day and were baptized as a sign of their new faith to Jesus.

When persecution of the church broke out in Jerusalem many disciples fled to other cities. As a result, the church began to grow and expand as these Christians settled in other cities and told their neighbors the story about Jesus. In a short time the church was no longer just a local phenomenon in Jerusalem, but was spreading throughout Asia Minor. Most of the letters of the New Testament were written to these young churches giving direction, counsel, and correction. They were written by the apostle’s, Paul, Peter, James, Jude and John. These new believers were not isolated individuals but gathered communities and congregations, called churches. We find these churches in cities like, Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Antioch, Thyatira, Philippi, and Colosse.

The New Testament letters are comprised primarily of promises and warnings. The promises paint a lofty and beautiful picture of the church and the new spiritual realities to be enjoyed in a relationship with Jesus. These promises include, the presence of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, the beauty of fellowship, the importance of Scripture, and the return of Jesus. The authors of these letters were concerned that these young churches understood their new spiritual identity and lived it out in their cities.

There were also many warnings in these letters. We find warnings to be aware of those who would confuse the church with teachings that were incompatible with the gospel of Christ. There are consistent warnings about conduct and lifestyle. The church was called to a new life, a way of life that was distinct from old patterns of living. Hence, we find warnings about, sexual immorality, spiritual compromise, and idolatry.

The first century church was to listen carefully to these promises and warnings for their own spiritual health and protection. Their survival depended on understanding and living out the promises and heeding and responding to the warnings. It is the same for the church today and for Santa Barbara Community Church in particular. This summer Santa Barbara Community Church will take twelve weeks to examine some of the promises and warnings found in the New Testament.

STUDY ONE: THE CHURCH

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. Ephesians 3:10

Mention the word “church” to any group of people and a host of images, thoughts, and feelings will come to mind. Ironically, these impressions will be as diverse as the people pondering the meaning of the word. The concept of church may elicit joy, anger, fondness, confusion, or ambivalence depending on one’s background, experience and understanding. Before we go on to look at what the

Bible has to say about the church, write down some of your own thoughts on the church. Where did you get your first exposure to a church? What has shaped your understanding of the church?



Mosaic of Jesus Hagia Sophia, Istanbul
Photo: Maura Conn

The idea of the church as distinct from national Israel was un-thought of to the first disciples of Jesus. Yet Jesus began to prepare his followers for what was to come after his death on the cross. Read Matthew 16:13–20 where we find Jesus’ first mention of the church.¹

How is the beginning of the church connected to Peter’s statement about Jesus in verse 16?

¹ The only other use of the word “church” in the gospels is found in Matthew 18:17.

Why do you think Jesus renames Peter?

What does Jesus impart to the church in verse 19?

The phrase “on this rock” (vs. 18) has been hotly debated. The rock could be a reference to either Peter himself or Peter’s confession of Jesus as the *Christ, the Son of the living God*. Given the context of these words which of these two options makes more sense to you?

The book of Acts is unique in the New Testament. We have 28 chapters of a fast paced narrative describing the birth and expansion of the church. Put yourself in the place of these first disciples. Their leader, Jesus, has been crucified and now some have seen him after the resurrection. Confusion and fear must have permeated this group of disciples. Read Acts 1:1 – 11.

What are the disciples still waiting for (vs. 6)?

What does Jesus promise them instead?

When that promise is fulfilled what are they supposed to do?

The opening chapters of Acts tell us about the beginning of the church. Among other things we read of:

- Acts 2:1 – 13 The gift of the Holy Spirit

- Acts 2:42–27 The fellowship of the church

- Acts 4:32–37 The practice of the church

- Acts 6:1–7 The organization of the church

While the church in Jerusalem is growing and enjoying fellowship, persecution against this young Christian community intensifies. Stephen, one of the leaders in the church, is arrested and eventually stoned to death. The result was that, *On that day a great persecution broke out against all the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.* (Acts 8:1)

Read Acts 11:19–26. As a result of the persecution the church is growing and spreading out geographically and becoming ethnically diverse.

Find Antioch on a map in your Bible. How far is it from Jerusalem?

Why did the leaders in Jerusalem send Barnabas to Antioch?

What were Barnabas and Saul doing in Antioch? Why is this significant?

The Bible never gives a detailed blueprint for what a church is to look like. We do, however, find numerous pictures and metaphors that give us significant help in understanding the nature and function of the church.² Consider these metaphors for the church and their implications for SBCC. What do these word pictures tell us about the church? What are the implications for the practical life of a church like SBCC?

- The church is a building. Read Ephesians 2:19–22 and 1 Peter 2:4–5
- The church is a body. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–31
- The church is a family (household). Read Ephesians 2:19 & 3:15 and Galatians 6:10.

As you think through the above verses and descriptions for the church consider SBCC and your role in its life. How do you think SBCC is doing corporately? Are we a good example of how the New Testament describes the church? Where could we grow?

How do you understand your “place” in the Body of Christ and in SBCC in particular? Where do your thinking and actions need to change?

² In the New Testament the church is variously described as the household of God, the people of God, the bride of Christ, and a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. In fact ninety–six word pictures of the church have been identified. Yet the image that permeates the New Testament understanding of the church and serves as an umbrella for all these metaphors is that of the church as the body of Christ. (Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business*, p. 41)

Many people find themselves disillusioned with local churches. They may be frustrated by institutionalism, hypocrisy, legalism, relevance, formalism, difficult people or a host of other ills either real or perceived. In spite of the dissatisfaction of some, the church remains central to God's will for his people. Read and ponder again the verse that began our study, Ephesians 3:10.

What does God hope to accomplish through the church?

Respond to the following statement:

The church does not exist simply for the purpose of saving souls, though that is a marvelous and important work. The supreme purpose of the church, as Paul makes explicit here, is to glorify God by manifesting His wisdom before the angels, who can then offer greater praise to God. The purpose of the universe is to give glory to God, and that will be its ultimate reality after evil is conquered and destroyed. The church is not an end in itself but a means to an end, the end of glorifying God. (John MacArthur, Ephesians, p.96)

What does our study so far tell us about choosing a particular church? What should we be looking for in a church?

What priorities should the local church have? How important should church life be in the life of a believer?

What does the Bible say to the Christian who feels they can go it "solo" in the faith without the church?

Respond to the following statements:

There is no future for the Christian individual in isolation from the church. The general and proper pattern of the normal Christian life is to be lived in warm and joyous fellowship with other believers in God's family. (Michael Griffiths, God's Forgetful Pilgrims, p. 87)

There is today a widespread belief that one can be a Christian and develop one's own faith system apart from the church. The proposition is ludicrous. Everyone regenerated by God, is, by definition, a part of the universal church. It is not a matter of choice or membership. And following the pattern made normative in the book of Acts, each believer is to make his or her confession, be baptized and become a part of a local congregation with all the accountability that implies. Membership in a church particular is no more optional than membership in the church universal. (Charles Colson, Being the Body, p. 46)

The church is not simply a good idea, convenient when needed. The church is essential to God's redemptive plan. Jesus reflects his presence in the world through an interdependent people. We need each other. (Greg Ogden, Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God, p. 59)

The writer of Hebrews succinctly captures some of the privilege and responsibility of being in a local church.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24–25

How do these verses speak to you about your involvement in SBCC?

As a group, spend time praying for the health and vitality of SBCC.

SERMON NOTES

STUDY TWO:
CORINTH AND THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT



Ruins of the Temple of Apollo, Corinth
Photo: Maura Conn

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. 1 Corinthians 2:12

The apostle Paul spent roughly eighteen months founding and establishing the church in the cosmopolitan city of Corinth. Paul and his band of fellow missionary workers showed up in Corinth in the spring of 50 A.D. on their second missionary journey. In the ensuing years the apostle wrote four letters to this strategic church. Our Bibles contain the second and fourth of these letters. 1 Corinthians was written from the city of Ephesus, while 2 Corinthians was most likely written from the province of Macedonia (see 2 Cor. 7:5, 8:1, 9:2) in the fall of 56 A.D.

Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth was stormy. In many ways the church was an immature mess. Sin was rampant, internal factions were real, and yet in spite of this a certain spiritual arrogance prevailed. Because this perpetually adolescent church struggled to understand its new identity as followers of Christ, Paul's letters to this church are full of teaching about the indwelling, empowering and gifting that the Holy Spirit brings to believers.

In 1 Corinthians Paul has some harsh words of correction for the church. Much of the letter is a corrective to immature and immoral behavior. Before Paul begins this critique, however, he establishes the presence of God's Spirit as the guiding influence in the life of a Christian. Read 1 Corinthians 2:6–16.

In verses 6–9 two types of *wisdom* are contrasted. Describe these two kinds of *wisdom*.

The punch line comes in verse 10. How does this verse say we came to understand God's *wisdom*?

How many references to the Spirit are there in verses 10–16?

According to these verses what role does God's Spirit play in the life of a Christian?¹

Think personally. How have you seen the Spirit help you to understand spiritual truth?

After numerous references to the *Spirit* and the *Spirit of God* in these verses we may be somewhat confused when Paul ends this section with verse 16. *But we have the mind of Christ.*

¹ There are 140 occurrences of "S/spirit" (pneuma) in Paul's letters. Paul uses the full name "Holy Spirit," seventeen times. He designates the Spirit as "the Spirit of God" / "his Spirit" sixteen times, and as "the Spirit of Christ," or its equivalent, three times. (Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, p. 28)

Corinth and the Promise of the Holy Spirit

In the verses below notice the fluid nature of language that talks about Jesus and the Spirit. What sort of picture do these verses present of this Jesus / Holy Spirit relationship? Do you find this comforting? How? Why or why not?

- Romans 8:9–11
- 2 Corinthians 3:17
- Galatians 4:6
- Philippians 1:19

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul laments the immaturity of the Corinthian church. He is particularly concerned here with their propensity to quarrel and be divisive. In 3:16–17 he reminds them of their new spiritual identity. Read 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 and ponder these questions.

What does God's temple consist of in the New Testament?

What is this imagery meant to convey to the believers at Corinth? Do you think Paul has in mind the temple in Jerusalem or the numerous temples in Corinth?

Where do these verse say God's Spirit dwells? (Be careful how you answer this one!)

How does the image of your body as God's temple change the way you think of yourself as a Christian? What (if any) changes in your lifestyle do you need to make based on that?

Fast forward three chapters. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul is still lamenting the immaturity of the Corinthian church! His immediate concern addressed here is sexual immorality. In a very similar fashion to what we saw in 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, Paul again uses the imagery of the temple to bolster his argument. Gordon Fee observes.

In 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, Paul makes the remarkable transfer of this imagery from the church to the individual believer. Thus God not only dwells in the midst of his people by the Spirit, but has likewise taken up residence in the lives of his people individually by the same life-giving Spirit. (Fee, p. 20)

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. Some Corinthians were suggesting that the human spirit was not affected by what a person does with their body, including having sex with prostitutes.

According to 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 where does the Holy Spirit reside?

What is the price we were bought for? (vs. 20)

What are the practical implications for our physical lives that the Holy Spirit resides within us?

What does it mean for your life when the Scriptures say, *You are not your own; you were bought with a price?* (vs. 20) In what ways are you, *not your own*?

Corinth and the Promise of the Holy Spirit

1 Corinthians 12 is a well known chapter in the Bible that describes the church as a body. Central to this imagery of the body is the indwelling presence of the Spirit and enabling and gifting he brings to that body. For many, this chapter may be well know territory. Make an effort to read it in a fresh way. Read 1 Corinthians 12 slowly in several translations.

How many times is the Holy Spirit referred to in chapter 12?

Notice the structure of Paul's teaching in verses 4–6.

same Spirit — different kinds of gifts
same Lord — different kinds of service
same God — different kinds of working

What does this tell us about God? What does this tell us about the nature of these gifts?

Look carefully at verse 7.

How many Christians have spiritual gifts?

What is the purpose of spiritual gifts according to this verse?

Why are these gifts referred to as, the *manifestation of the Spirit*?

The role of the Holy Spirit in gifting and empowering believers for ministry in the body becomes very clear in 1 Corinthians 12. Look again at verses 11–13.

Who decides how giftedness in the body is given?

Who baptizes us into this body?

Is there any such thing as a Christian who does not have the Holy Spirit in their life? (See also Romans 8:9, Ephesians 1:13)

Take a moment and think about 1 Corinthians 12 and your own life and involvement at SBCC.

In what areas do you feel God has gifted you? Be specific.

Paul uses body parts, foot, ear, eye, etc., to make his point. If you had to use this imagery of body parts to describe how you see yourself functioning at SBCC, in your Homegroup, what body part would you be? Be ready to share how you see others functioning in their giftedness in your Homegroup and the church.²

In the New Testament, when gifts of the Spirit are mentioned none of the lists are the same. A comparison of 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12:3–8 and 1 Peter 4:10–11 show overlaps and an emphasis on the fact of the believer's giftedness rather than a preoccupation with the particular gifts. What does this tell us when we think about our giftedness and place in the body?

² Gordon Fee makes this observation about spiritual gifts. *One of the fads among evangelicals in the final decades of the twentieth century has been that of finding your spiritual gift. There was hardly a church or youth group that did not have such a conference or seminar. While I appreciate the motivation behind this movement, that each of us recognize and appreciate our role in the church, nonetheless the New Testament scholar in me winced on more than one occasion. I can not imagine Paul understanding what was going on at all!* (Fee, p. 163)

After reading and thinking about 1 Corinthians 12, what do you find comforting in these teachings? What do you find a challenge to your Christian experience?

Before we end this study consider one more Corinthian passage that speaks of the role of the Spirit in the life of a believer. Read 2 Corinthians 3:17–18. The context here is the Old Testament story of Moses' face reflecting the glory of God after receiving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:29ff.). For the purposes of this study consider the role of transformation in the Christians life.

According to these verses how are believers being transformed?

Who does this work of transformation?

How has the Spirit transformed your life?

Think where we have been in this study of the Spirit, particularly in relationship to the Corinthian church. Why might these instructions be particularly important for a church like Corinth that struggled with spiritual immaturity in the midst of a very pagan culture? How have you found these promises of the Spirit and encouragement in your own discipleship?

Respond to this statement by Gordon Fee.

For Paul, the Spirit is not merely an impersonal force or influence or power. The Spirit is none other than the fulfillment of the promise that God himself would once again be present with his people.

STUDY THREE: CORINTH AND THE WARNING OF IMMORALITY

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. 1 Corinthians 6:11

As we are beginning to see in our study, the New Testament is full of wonderful life-giving promises that pertain to the believer's new standing and relationship with God. At the same time the Scriptures are replete with warnings having to do with both faulty belief systems (false doctrine) and sinful lifestyles that are incompatible with living this new life in Christ. In our last study we examined some of the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church at Corinth. In spite of these life-giving promises, the church at Corinth was prone to sinful behavior. Paul, the spiritual father of this at times unruly church, was not shy about warning them of their immorality.

Consider the cultural and moral atmosphere in which this church was born. Corinth was strategically situated on a plateau overlooking the Isthmus of Corinth, standing between the northern and southern parts of the province. It also stood between the eastern and western sea straits. Because of its ability to control both north-south trade routes and east-west shipping, Corinth became a major center for industry and trade. It was in this atmosphere of a busy, prosperous and transient city that Corinth developed a well deserved reputation for degeneracy. Accordingly, Aristophanes used a term that became well known. To "Corinthianize" became a euphemism for sexual immorality.

It is in this context of cosmopolitan heathenism that the Corinthian church was born. It is no wonder that Paul could say of this group of believers, *Neither the sexually immoral nor idolater nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were.* (1 Cor. 6:9–11, emphasis added) Ralph Martin explains the situation.



Baal God, Hittite Ruins, Turkey
Photo: Kelly Soifer

Acts 18:1–11 tells us that the church was formed as a result of Paul’s preaching in the local synagogue. Nonetheless, it is probably correct to assume that the preponderance of the church members were Gentile, converted to Christ from a pagan milieu. These were called to be God’s people in the “Vanity Fair” of the Roman Empire. Murphy-O’Connor writes of Corinth in Paul’s day as “a wide-open boomtown,” comparing it with San Francisco of the gold rush days. (Martin, 2 Corinthians, p. xxix)

Unfortunately, the Corinthian church all too often looked more like Corinth than the church of Jesus Christ. Because of this sad state of affairs Paul writes a warning. As is our habit in this study of, “The New Testament Church: Promise and Warnings”, we will limit the text to primarily a particular church situation.

Read 1 Corinthians 5 and 6. These two chapters take the warning of immorality out of the theoretical and place them squarely within the context of a living church body.

Record your first reactions to your reading of these two chapters. What surprises you? What questions do you have about these chapters?¹

In chapter 5 Paul has two main concerns. **First**, there is the immorality itself. A man who *calls himself a brother* is engaged in sinful sexual behavior. **Second**, Paul is concerned about the blasé attitude of the church toward this man’s sin! Which of the two concerns seems most prominent in Paul’s mind? To whom is this chapter addressed? Why?

Paul is incredulous that the church would be proud of the sin in their midst!² While we are not told exactly, why might the church be proud of this deplorable situation?

¹ Matthew 18:15-20 is the other main N.T. passage that speaks of church discipline.

² *Porneia*, literally means, *resorting to prostitutes*. In the New Testament it is the most generic word for sex outside of marriage and is often translated *fornication* or, in the NIV, *sexual immorality*.

According to these verses what does Paul say should be the church's response to the presence of this immoral man in their midst? Could Paul make himself any clearer?

- 5:5
- 5:9
- 5:11
- 5:13

At the very least, Paul is instructing the church to separate themselves from this man who is sexually immoral because he *calls himself a brother*.

Paul says, *do not associate* with such a person and, *With such a man do not even eat*. The Greek verb translated, *do not associate*, means *to mix up*, or, *to mingle with*. The word could refer to either social intimacy or, more severely, to all social contact.

There seem to be two reasons for the discipline of this man. One is to benefit the man and the other is to benefit the church. According to the verses listed what is the reason Paul gives for this discipline?

Reason #1 – Verse 5 (for the man)³

Reason #2 – Verses 6–8 (for the church)

Often we think of church discipline as the heavy-handed lowering of the boom on some wayward soul. Notice the corporate dimension of 1 Corinthians 5. Paul never addresses the leadership of the church. To the contrary he addresses the entire church! It is not the responsibility of a few leaders to “do” church discipline. The responsibility falls upon the entire church.

³ In what is most likely a wonderful footnote to this sad situation we read 2 Corinthians 2:5–11. Many think this is a reference to the same man mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. The supposition is that the man had repented of his sin and now Paul is instructing the church to welcome this person back into the fellowship of the larger body of believers.

While the immediate context is sexual immorality Paul goes to list five other areas of flagrant disobedience that likewise, if un-repented of, would require expulsion from the church. What are these sins listed in verse 11? How are they similar? How are they different?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Look again at verse 12–13. Think about the New Testament teaching as a whole. Why is it that Christians, those *inside the church*, are called to a different (higher) standard than our friends *outside* of the church?

Let's step outside of the situation at Corinth for just a minute. How do these two Scriptures help us in understanding this tough-minded text in 1 Corinthians?

- Galatians 6:1

- James 5:19–20

In chapter six Paul addresses lawsuits among believers and again turns to the persistent Corinthian problem of sexual immorality. What is the tone of Paul's comments in this chapter? Has he calmed down at all from chapter 5, or is he still flabbergasted at these

carnal Corinthians? Be ready to point out to your Homegroup any hints from the text that indicate Paul's mood.

Consider carefully 1 Corinthians 6:9–11. Once again, as in 1 Corinthians 5:9–10, Paul gives us a list of sinful lifestyles that exclude people from the kingdom of God. The kicker comes in verse 11! *And that is what some of you were*. In other words Paul is saying, that was the old life! And yes you came from that sort of living! But now you are a new creation in Christ now! In verse 11 Paul gives us three vivid word pictures that describe our new standing in Christ. Explain each of them (you may want to use a concordance to find other Scriptures that help). How do these word pictures help the believer to understand why flagrant, consistent sin is incompatible with being a disciple of Christ?

- *were washed*

- *were sanctified*

- *were justified*

How has this *washing, sanctification, and justification* transformed your lifestyle?

Consider Paul's introductory remarks that began this letter to Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:20). Amazingly, Paul writes to a church he knows to be struggling with sin, *to those sanctified in Christ Jesus* (accomplished fact) *and called to be holy* (to be lived out daily). How does this statement inform what is to come in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6?

Corinth and the Warning of Immorality

As Paul again speaks of sexual sin in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, he encourages these Corinthian believers to *flee from sexual immorality* (vs. 18). Let's broaden the categories for the sake of our Homegroup discussion. How are you currently *fleeing* sin (any sin) in your life? How can your Homegroup encourage and pray for you?

Take a step back from the particulars of 1 Corinthians 5-6. How is the big picture warning we find in these chapters applicable to Santa Barbara Community Church? Are we being careful to not tolerate sin in our church? What lessons can we learn from Corinth?

SERMON NOTES

STUDY FOUR:
JERUSALEM AND THE GIFT OF FELLOWSHIP:
A PROMISE AND A WARNING

They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Acts 2:42

The first few weeks in a new job, the arrival of a new baby, or moving into a new house, often are wonderful times filled with genuine joy, hope, laughter and warmth. In short order, however, we realize that the new job is work, the baby cries, and that cute house needs lots of upkeep. While good times continue, they are tempered by reality.

The experience of the first church in Jerusalem must have been something like this. After the initial disappointment of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, sadness quickly turns to joy with the resurrection of their Lord and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. This fearful and directionless band of disciples is transformed into a dynamic growing body of believers. The fellowship they enjoyed was an essential component of this new church. The descriptions of their corporate life conjure a picture of warmth, sacrifice, and harmony. While the fellowship the church in Jerusalem enjoyed was genuine, the reality of life together soon set in.

As we look to the church in Jerusalem in this study we will find both a promise of fellowship and a warning that this fellowship is fragile.

Fellowship. It is a word that is used fairly often, especially in Christian circles. What does it mean? When you hear this word what comes to mind? When you think of Christian *fellowship* does a smile or a scowl come to your face?



Stain Glass Window, Jewish Synagogue, Istanbul
Photo: Kelly Soifer

Read Acts 2:42–47 and Acts 4:32–37. Remember when reading the book of Acts we are reading a narrative account rather than direct teaching as in most of the letters of the New Testament. This requires that we try to look behind the scenes and understand the living dynamic of the church in Jerusalem. Among other things, these two brief accounts describe something of the fellowship experienced in the early days of church life. How would you interpret what you read? Try to characterize and describe this fellowship.

The word for *fellowship* in the Greek language is *koinonia*. In the first century the word was common and used often outside of the New Testament. It was used of business partnerships and especially of the marriage relationship.

Two people enter into marriage in order to have 'koinonia of life', that is to say, to live together in a life in which everything is shared. So in secular Greek koinonia is used to express a close intimate relationship into which people enter. (William Barclay, New Testament Words, p. 173)

The word *koinonia* also carries with it the idea of community or having things in common. Acts 2:44 reads, *All the believers were together and had everything in **common***, but could be translated, *had everything in **fellowship***. Because of context, the translators have appropriately rendered vs. 44 *common* and vs. 42 *fellowship*, even though in the Greek it is the same word (*koinonia*).

If business partners have a fellowship-centered in their business relationship and married couples have a fellowship in their home and family, what is the basis for fellowship in the local church? What do you see in our two Acts texts that point to the foundation of this church fellowship?

To be a part of the church in Jerusalem involved a relationship not only with Jesus, but with God's people. Look again at Acts 2:42–47 and Acts 4:32–37. Write down all the ways in which the language of these texts point to the relational nature (fellowship) of their new identity in Christ and in the church.

How is the fellowship that is to be enjoyed in the local church different than the fellowship enjoyed on a softball team, the Rotary club, or simply a circle of friends?

Read 1 John 1:3. How does this help you understand the nature of fellowship?

One of the loudest voices of the church renewal movement has been Howard Snyder. In 1975 he wrote a much talked about book called, *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age*. Discuss and respond to his statement on church fellowship.¹

The church today is suffering a fellowship crisis. It is simply not experiencing nor demonstrating that “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:14) that marked the New Testament church. The church is highly organized just at the time when her members are caring less about organization and more about community. One seldom finds within the institutionalized church today that winsome intimacy among people where masks are dropped, honesty prevails and there is that sense of communication and community beyond the human—where there is literally the fellowship of and in the Holy Spirit. (Snyder, p. 89)

¹ Thinkers such as Howard Snyder and Elton Trueblood were influential in the early thinking and structure of Santa Barbara Community Church. Snyder writes, “The idea of the koinonia of the Holy Spirit, then, suggests that the church should provide structures in which 1) believers gather together, 2) intercommunication is encouraged, 3) and informal atmosphere allows the freedom in the Spirit and 4) direct Bible study is central.” (Snyder, p. 98)

It is widely acknowledged that ours is a very individualistic age. People tend to be independent, and connected with others only on their own terms and agenda. How does this independent spirit affect fellowship in local churches? How has it affected SBCC?

How can genuine Biblical fellowship act as a counterweight to this cultural tendency of independence?

Go back and ponder Acts 2:42. It is fairly easy to understand what it meant to be devoted to the *apostle teaching, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*. But what does it mean to be **devoted to the fellowship**? Give some very practical illustrations in your life and the life of SBCC of what this devotion to fellowship should look like.

Least we become overly idealistic about the beauty of harmonious fellowship at Jerusalem we find a sobering warning about the fragile nature of this fellowship in Acts 6:1–7. This is the first recorded division or problem in the church at Jerusalem. It didn't take long!

Read Acts 6:1–7. What seems to be the problem? Look behind the scenes. How would the fact that some had complained affect the fellowship at Jerusalem?²

² Luke may be drawing a parallel between the early church and the Old Testament people of God. The word translated "*complained*" is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament when the Israelites complained or murmured against Moses (Ex. 16:7, Numbers 14:27).

It is fairly obvious that the problem was due in large part to culture. The Greek speaking Jewish believers felt that the Hebrew (Aramaic) speaking brothers and sisters were being favored. These Greek speaking Jews had been Hellenized, and not only spoke a different language, but had adopted Roman dress and customs. How can culture affect the fellowship of believers at SBCC? Think in terms of politics, economics, and lifestyle.

What types of attitudes are necessary to maintain fellowship with people who are different from us and yet worship the same Jesus in the same church?

Again, make an effort to be practical and earthy. What can we do at SBCC to enhance and guard the fellowship we enjoy as a body?

As is our habit in this study guide, the questions and text has been confined primarily to the church in Jerusalem and the book of Acts. Be ready to share with your Homegroup other Scriptures in the New Testament that have helped you form an understanding of what fellowship in the local church should look like.

STUDY FIVE:
EPHESUS — GOOD DOCTRINE — WEAK LOVE
REVELATION 2:1–7



Ephesus Amphitheatre and Street Leading to Harbor
Photo: Maura Conn

*He who has an ear, let him hear
what the Spirit says to the churches.*

Revelation 2:7

In reading through the New Testament, it is abundantly clear that Jesus expected his followers to be engaged in the ongoing process of learning what it means to actually live out the Scriptures. Jesus also makes it clear that this learning process is never a solo attempt, but always a communal one and, for this reason, Christ announces in Matthew 16:13–19 the advent of the church—God’s idea for community gathered in his name.

The church is also to live out its purpose of loving God, and each other. Consider this:

One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Matthew 22:34–40

All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. *Everything* revealed by God—instruction or prophesy—is hinged on these two commands. “Love me with everything you’ve got, and love one another.” Nothing less will do.

Enter the church at Ephesus.

Read Revelation 2:1–7

Ephesus was the most prominent city in Roman Asia Minor. Part of present-day Turkey, Ephesus had about 250,000 residents during John’s time. Set near the Aegean Sea,

Ephesus sat at the intersection of three major trade routes, making it a meeting place for commerce, culture and religion. Ephesus was home to one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Temple of Diana. This temple occupied the area of two soccer fields, and was supported by one hundred columns, each fifty feet high, and it seated over 24,000. As the main landmark in this beautiful city, the Temple of Diana also held the dubious distinction of being a center of immorality in its worship practices (of Diana, whom the Greeks referred to as “Artemis”).

If the city was impressive, so also was the church community which grew there. Paul established a church in Ephesus on his second missionary journey, and later spent three years there. The gospel was warmly received and the church grew by leaps and bounds. Later on, Timothy served in the Ephesian church, as did Priscilla & Aquila, and the apostle John. Clearly, the Ephesian church was blessed with able leaders.

So, what happened? Let’s turn to the text:

2:1 Each of the seven letters in Revelation will be addressed to an angel. What does this mean? Three views are popular.

1. The letters are, indeed, addressed to a guardian angel who keeps watch over the local church.
2. Since the angel means “messenger,” this is John’s way of addressing the “pastor” or “bishop” of each church.
3. Angel refers to “the prevailing spirit of the church.”¹

Which view makes the most sense to you?

2:1(b) Who holds the seven stars and what do they represent? And what do the seven lampstands represent? (Hint: See Rev. 1:20)

2:2 Evaluate SBCC with regard to this commendation. Would Jesus give similar compliments to our body of believers? Why? Why not?

¹ Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p.85

The Ephesian church is praised for her ability to discern false teachers. Because Ephesus was a seaside cosmopolitan center at the intersection of three trade routes, there was more than ample exposure to false teaching as many passed through this city on their way to Rome. How do you think the Ephesian church “tested the claims” of those who said they were apostles?

In what ways can we test the message of those who claim to come in God’s name? How do you see us doing this (or not doing this) at SBCC? Explain.

2:4 is startling. This vibrant church, which God praises for her dedication, discernment and endurance, is now called to account for her lack of love. The New Living Translation says, *“You don’t love me or each other as you did at first!”*

Read and consider the following Scriptures:

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. Ephesians 1:15–16

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. John 13:34–35

What are the ingredients that cause a church to become loveless? Share your thoughts on this as a group.

Since we believe that the church represents the Body of Christ, with each part important to the whole, and each part affecting the whole, let us now take this question down to the individual level. What are the ingredients that cause **you** to become loveless?

What is the remedy for the Ephesian church? What is the remedy for you? Look for three specific words of instruction.

Commenting on Revelation 2:4, Robert Mounce writes:

Every virtue carries within itself the seeds of it's own destruction.²

What are the virtues of SBCC? What “seeds of destruction” might be contained in those virtues?

Virtue

Potential Seed of Destruction

Now, apply the same question to yourself.

What can you do to help your church avoid *lovelessness*?

² Mounce, p. 88

It is important to remember that the seven letters to the seven churches that we find in the book of Revelation, were real letters written to address real problems in real churches. The letters were also, however, prophetic proclamations for all churches that were to follow. This letter was written for us, at Santa Barbara Community Church, for the purpose of warning.

Read Matthew 24:12

What does Jesus say would happen?

The only appropriate way to end this study is in prayer. Spend time thanking God for his unfailing love for you. Then ask Him for more. He longs to give it to you.

Write your prayer below:

Consider closing your time together as a group by reading 1 Corinthians 13 as a springboard to worship.

STUDY SIX:
PERGAMUM AND
THYATIRA:
THE WARNING OF
COMPROMISE

*He who has an ear, let him
hear what the Spirit says to
the churches. Revelation 2:17*



Temple of Trajan, Pergamum
Photo: Kelly Soifer

Like Ephesus, Pergamum was a spectacular city. The city's physical geography was stunning in that it was built on a hill towering one thousand feet above the surrounding valley of Caicus. The name Pergamum comes from the word "citadel."

Pergamum, located 45 miles north of Smyrna, was a cultural center. The town's library contained more than 200,000 volumes and was the second largest library in the world after Alexandria in Egypt. Tradition says that parchment was invented in Pergamum.

Pergamum was a religious center. It contained temples dedicated to Dionysus (god of wine), Athena (goddess of wisdom), Asclepius (god of healing) and Demeter (goddess of harvest) along with three temples to the emperor or imperial cult. At the center of it all was the altar to Zeus, the principal god of the Greek pantheon of gods. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find the letter calling Pergamum *Satan's throne*. This city was the official center of the imperial cult of Rome. To the casual visitor it looked like Rome was in control of this city, but to John the city was Satan's.

Thyatira, however, was the least important of the seven cities addressed in Revelation 2-3 and very different from Pergamum. The city, which lay 45 miles east of Pergamum was not a religious center for pagan worship nor was it particularly beautiful. Thyatira was a blue-collar city of workers. It was known for its trade guilds, which included wool workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave dealers, and bronzesmiths. Accordingly, the Christian church had to grapple with doing business in an environment that was often hostile to the gospel.

Read Revelation 2:12–29.

Pergamum and Thyatira: The Warning of Compromise

A clue to some of our questions will come from what we know of these two cities. It appears that the church in both Pergamum and Thyatira were involved in spiritual compromise to the dominant culture. Hence, we have two letters of warning concerning this compromise. Compare and contrast these two churches. List the ways these two warnings are similar. How are they different?

Similar

Different

The letter to the church in Pergamum is confusing! If you find yourself a bit perplexed by the imagery and names, you are not alone. Start with what is fairly easy to understand.

What does verse 12 tell us about Satan?

What happened to Antipas?

The Greek word appearing in most of our translations as *my witness* (vs. 13) is actually *martyr*. Scholars see here one of the earliest uses of this word as a technical term (shorthand) for one who dies for his or her faith. While we know nothing about Antipas, his mention shows the serious nature of the persecution the Pergamum church faced.

How does the letter affirm the faith of the believers?

What is the indictment or warning to this church?

Who are Balaam and Balak? This will be difficult so take a deep breath and have some fun! Sometimes in Bible study we have to look behind the scenes.

The names Balaam and Balak take us to the Old Testament book of Numbers, chapters 22–25, where we read of Balaam who attempted to serve both God and God’s enemies. The story is set during the time of Israel’s wandering in the desert for 40 years. While camped on the plains of Moab, near the promised land, the prophet Balaam was summoned by Balak, King of the Moabites. King Balak was terrified of the Israelites because they had prevailed over the Amorites in a recent battle. Clear so far? King Balak hires Balaam to pronounce a prophetic curse on Israel. Balaam attempts to do so but is unable, so he advised the king of an alternative plan: *Get the Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men. In time their hearts will be turned away from Yahweh (the God of Israel) and Yahweh will send his wrath on Israel.* The plan worked. Balak got what he wanted through deception, through chicanery. Numbers 25:1–3 reads, *While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD’s anger burned against them.*

With the above background in mind re-read Revelation 2:14. The story of Balaam and Balak is used as an illustration of what is transpiring in Pergamum with some believers. How does spiritual seduction like this happen in a church? How could SBCC be compromised spiritually?

Often in Scripture we find that idolatry and sexual immorality go together. That is the situation here in Pergamum (verse 14). Why is this the case? Why are these two sins often found together?

We don’t know who the Nicolaitans are. The context certainly indicates that some in the church at Pergamum advocated a type of spiritual compromise, possibly with the imperial cult of Rome.

In what ways are you tempted to be a Nicolaitan, to inappropriately compromise with today’s culture?

Broaden your discussion to the American church. Where do you see a tolerance and compromise to non-Biblical teaching? For example, are we afraid to proclaim the exclusive message of Jesus' salvation—that *no one comes to Father but through me?* (John 14:6) What might Jesus' charge be to the church of Pergamum / USA today?

Consider the same question with regard to SBCC and the culture of Santa Barbara. What particular temptations to spiritual compromise does SBCC face?

The letter to the church at Thyatira begins with six areas the church is doing well in. What are these six?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

It is somewhat ironic that a church that receives this kind of praise then goes on to have serious charges leveled against it. What might Jesus say to Santa Barbara Community Church? Commendation or criticism?

What are we to make of Jezebel? Scholars are unsure whether there really was a woman in the church named Jezebel, or if this was a label meant to inspire comparison with the Old Testament woman. Read the following OT passages and discuss any similarities you find between the Jezebel of Thyatira and the wife of King Ahab.

- 1 Kings 16:30-33
- 1 Kings 21:1–25 (note especially verse 25)
- 2 Kings 9:22

The criticism Jesus offers those in Thyatira is best taken at face value. There appears to be a woman prophetess in the church who is leading some in the congregation into compromise with their culture. The specific charge is *sexual immorality* (fornication) and *the eating of foods offered to idols*. While we cannot be certain, it may be that the fornication referred to here is a figure of speech for idolatry. In the Old Testament, fornication sometimes meant literal sexual sin and at other times it was a figure of speech for idolatry. With this in mind ponder Ezekiel 16 (especially verses 15–34, 47,58). This text may shock you. How does Ezekiel 16 show the gravity of spiritual fornication?

A key to understanding this letter to Thyatira is to remember that it was a city in which to do business. Accordingly, the Christian church had to grapple with doing business in a pagan environment. Pastor Earl Palmer sees John's paraphrase of Psalm 2 as a great encouragement to our work lives. Respond to this statement. How does it encourage you?

The approach of this letter is to place the daily lives of the Christians upon a larger stage and within a larger context. I must see my task, my daily deployment, as a part of the larger goal of my life. This is the only way that I can correctly size up the demands of any job so that on the one hand I am a good and hard worker and yet on the other I keep faith with my integrity and my greater loyalties. The letter quotes Psalm 2 to assure these Christians there is a greater management to which we belong. (Palmer, Revelation, p.143)

How is it with you and your employment? Is it a place of compromise? Do you worship your work? Has a promotion or a career path become an idol? Would you be willing to work for less if the work was more meaningful? Who goes to work with you—Jesus or Jezebel?

Several of the letters in Revelation 2–3 speak of overcoming. What does it mean to be an overcomer in time and place? In your life?

The theme for our study has been the warning of compromise. The churches of Pergamum and Thyatira were both involved in spiritual and cultural compromise that drew them away from Jesus. Summarize what you have learned. What are the effects of spiritual compromise? How can we guard against this tendency at SBCC?

STUDY SEVEN:
LAODICEA AND THE WARNING OF BEING LUKEWARM
REVELATION 3:14–22



Ruins of Aqueduct, Laodicea
Photo: Kelly Soifer

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
Revelation 2:22

Freedom. Prosperity. These are things that our founding fathers fought to acquire and preserve for the American people. We enjoy the highest standard of living in the world. Statistics show that Americans spend more than 30% of their income on luxury items, compared to less than 10% just forty years ago. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis also reveals that Americans' spending on recreation rose from \$42.7 billion in 1970 to \$246.8 billion in 1988—a 477% increase. Who knows what that figure would amount to today!

Interestingly, Laodicea, shortly after the time of Christ, shared much in common with us. Laodicea was a prosperous city. Situated (like Ephesus) at the intersection of three major trade routes in the Lycus Valley, it was home to many wealthy bankers and financiers. The wealth of the city allowed it to build theaters, a huge stadium, lavish public baths and marketplaces to rival our modern malls. Laodicea boasted a famous medical school, which produced a renowned eye salve, and was also the center for production of high quality black wool used to produce carpets and clothing. Life was good.

One thing, however, that Laodicea did not have going for it was that, like Santa Barbara, it had awful drinking water. Colossae, a neighboring city seven miles away, had refreshing cold water from natural springs. Hierapolis, to the north, was known for its medicinal

Laodicea and the Warning of Being Lukewarm

hot springs. By the time Revelation was written, a stone aqueduct had been built from Hierapolis to Laodicea. By the time the water flowed down the aqueduct into the city, however, the water was a distasteful lukewarm.

With that background in mind, now read Rev. 3:14–22.

What allusions can you find to Laodicea’s history, geography and commerce in Jesus’ words to the Laodicean church?

What is the central criticism of the Laodicean church?

What factors do you think could have contributed to their condition? How could they have fallen so far without knowing?

3:14 The letter to the church at Laodicea begins with a description of Christ, the Savior, who is the true and authoritative answer to the Laodicean church.

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.

This Greek word (*amhn* = *Amen*) comes from a root which means “to be firm, stable, sure, established, trustworthy.”

3:15–16 form the heart of this letter and contain the core of Jesus’ criticism regarding the Laodicean church.

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!

Neither cold, like the refreshing springs at Colossae, nor hot like the healing waters at Hierapolis, the Laodicean church had become as tepid as their own water supply—distasteful and nauseating.

Think about the life of a church. What happens to make it *neither cold nor hot*? What could a church be doing, or ignoring, to make for a lukewarm community?

How can SBCC guard against becoming a lukewarm church?

What is the five-fold criticism in v. 17? How would this list surprise the Laodiceans?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

What is the threefold counsel (v. 18) of Jesus to the Laodicean church?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What do these images bring to mind?

Gold refined in the fire See 1 Pet. 1:7

White clothes See Rev. 19:8

Eye-salve See Eph. 1:18

Laodicea and the Warning of Being Lukewarm

Buy from me... How can we buy from Christ what is only given in grace and received by faith? Read Isaiah 55:1–3. Re-write these verses, in your own words, in the space below:

The Laodicean church had grown numb. Self-satisfied, self-preoccupied, comfortable in wealth, they had lost their impact in the world because they had become so immersed in the blessings of life that they left the Blessor standing outside. Jesus levels his harshest criticism for the Laodicean church and yet, his entreaty for them to turn back is his most tender.

3:20 Read this verse, and picture the “Blessor,” Jesus, standing outside.

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

The Greek word for *knock* is in the present tense, which denotes continuous action. Christ’s invitation is ongoing, even after we have sinned against him.

Now, let’s move from the corporate condition to the personal. After examining the criticism of the Laodicean church, what parallels do you find in your own life?

Respond to the following, from John Piper:

If you don’t feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great. (John Piper, A Hunger for God, p. 23)

What “small things” do you tend to stuff yourself with? What practical things can you do to set things right?

The power of “remembering” is called forth throughout the bible, particularly in the book of Deuteronomy. In it God warns the Israelites nine times not to forget what He had done for them, and fifteen times He tells them to remember Him and His deliverance.

Read Deuteronomy 6:10–14.

What directives does God give in these verses, and for what purpose?

How can the decision to “remember God” positively affect our relationship with Him?

Think about the Laodicean church. What factors do you think led them to forget God?

One of the saddest things in Jesus’ words to the Laodicean church is that, in telling them that they are “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked,” he says *but you do not even realize...*

By the standards of our world, we are wealthy people, living among other wealthy people. It’s easy to lose our bearings. As we pray for ourselves, and for our church, we should all be praying that “we will realize” when we begin to drift away from the abundant life that God has planned for us. The Laodiceans chose the material wealth of this world over the abundance that Jesus holds. They forgot His sovereign power, and they lost their way.

God, correct us and protect us!

Spend some time together praying. The following verses might be helpful to guide your time of prayer:

Eccl. 5:10—Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.

Ps. 23:5—You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

1 Tim. 6:10—For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for

Laodicea and the Warning of Being Lukewarm

money, have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Mal. 3:10—“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

James 5:3— Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire.

John 1:16— From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.

SERMON NOTES

STUDY EIGHT:
JERUSALEM AND THE WARNING OF LEGALISM
ACTS 15



Ruins From Ancient Basilica, 4th c. A.D., Philippi
Photo: Kelly Soifer

*We believe it is through the grace
of our Lord Jesus Christ that we
are saved ...*
Acts 15:11

The book of Acts is the exciting story of the expansion of the church from a tiny core of disciples in Jerusalem to a sweeping movement that spread throughout the Roman empire. In the beginning, the church was almost entirely Jewish with a few God-fearing Gentile converts. Slowly the circle of faith in Jesus began to expand. In spite of Old Testament prophecies of Gentile conversion and the words of Jesus that they would *make disciples of all nations*, the early Jewish followers of Jesus were surprised that Gentiles were beginning to repent and come to faith. Eventually the young church in Jerusalem would be troubled and severely tested by the inclusion of Gentiles into the church.

Our main text for this study will be Acts 15 and the drama surrounding the Jerusalem council. Before we come to Acts 15, however, trace the slow expansion of the church to include Gentiles. Luke, the author of Acts, is careful to record instances of Gentile conversion leading up to the climactic meeting in Jerusalem.

Read Acts 10. Here we find the story of Peter's vision and Cornelius' conversion.

Who was Cornelius? What do we know of his spiritual life?

Peter realizes two great truths in this chapter. What are they?

1. Acts 10:9–15

2. Acts 10:34–35

What is the relationship between Peter's vision and Cornelius' conversion?

Read Acts 10:45 carefully. Why were the circumcised believers astonished?

Read Acts 11:1–18 where Peter explains his vision and experience with Cornelius to the believers in Jerusalem.

Why do the circumcised believers criticize Peter? Acts 11:2–3

What is their eventual response? Acts 11:18

As the church in Jerusalem grew, persecution broke out. It was a dangerous time to be a Christian. This persecution caused some families to get out of town. As they fled, the gospel message was heard in new locations.

Read Acts 11:19–30.¹

At first these fleeing believers told the gospel message *only to Jews*. Then something unique happened in city of Antioch. These Jewish believers, refugees from Jerusalem, began to tell the good news about the Lord Jesus to Greeks! What was the response of the church in Jerusalem when they heard that *a great number of people (Gentiles) believed?*

Eventually, as the church at Antioch grew, they sent off a team of the first missionaries to preach the good news and establish churches. As Paul, Barnabas and their band of brothers traveled throughout the region speaking the gospel message, they began to speak on the Sabbath in local synagogues. The Jewish reaction was often less than hospitable.

¹ Chapter 11 is the turning point in the book of Acts. In the first eleven chapters of Acts the apostle Peter is the dominant figure. After chapter 11 the apostle Paul comes to prominence in this unfolding story of church expansion.

Read Acts 13:44–48. How do Paul and Barnabas react to the Jewish rejection of the gospel? What Old Testament Scripture do they quote to justify their actions?

Think about this Jew / Gentile racial and cultural dilemma in the early church. What racial / cultural dilemmas do you see in today's church?

Be ready to share stories of how you know of God working in people groups very different from your own.

As the book of Acts continues, what began as a gentle trickle of Gentile converts is now becoming a flood. We come now to the heart of this study. With the above background in mind read, Acts 15:1–35 and the story of the Jerusalem council. What questions do you have about these events?

John Stott helps set the stage for conflict in Jerusalem.

*The Jewish leaders had no difficulty with the general concept of believing Gentiles, for many Old Testament passages predicted their inclusion. But now a particular question was forming in their minds; what means of incorporation into the believing community did God intend for Gentiles? So far it had been assumed that they would be absorbed into Israel by circumcision, and that by observing the law they would be acknowledged as bona fide members of the covenant people of God. Something quite different was now happening, however, something which disturbed and even alarmed many. Gentile converts were being welcomed into fellowship by baptism without circumcision. They were becoming Christians without also becoming Jews. They were retaining their own identity and integrity as members of other nations. (Stott, *The Spirit, The Church & The World*, p. 240)*

What precipitated the crisis in Antioch?

How did Paul and Barnabas respond to these men from Judea?

What is the essence of Peter's speech to the leaders in Jerusalem?² (see 15:11)

Why did Paul and Barnabas recount the *miraculous signs and wonders* God had done among the Gentiles? (15:12) What purpose did this serve?

James, the brother of Jesus, is evidently the moderator of this council. Summarize what James has to say about this issue. (15:13–21)

The letter that the leaders in Jerusalem send to the church in Antioch is short and to the point! What three things do they require of the believers in Antioch? Why?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Consider Stott's comment on these requirements.

At the same time, having established the principle that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, without works, it was necessary to appeal to these Gentile believers to respect the consciences of their Jewish fellow-believers by abstaining from a few practices which might offend them. (Stott, p. 248)

Take a step back from your reading and pondering of this narrative in Acts. Think about your own life and relationship with God. Have you noticed any tendencies toward legalism in your Christian life? Do we consciously or unconsciously teach people that to become a believer in Jesus and a part of the church they must first do certain things to qualify? What would be some examples of this type of legalism?

² It has been about ten years since Peter's encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10).

Read Acts 16:1–5

The letter and decision reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem is delivered to many churches. The letter makes it clear that circumcision is not required for salvation. Why then does Paul have his protégé Timothy circumcised?

Consider one more crucial portion of Scripture that bears on our discussion of Acts 15. Read Galatians 2:11–16. Paul writes Galatians because he is concerned that some are perverting the gospel by making observance of the law a prerequisite for salvation. Unfortunately he even has to confront Peter who succumbed temporarily to this legalism. The situation described in Acts 15 is the same as the one described here in Galatians 2:11–16.³

Why does Paul describe this behavior of Peter and others as *hypocrisy*?

Look again at Galatians 2:16 and remind yourself once again how a person comes into a relationship with God (justified). Be ready to share with your Homegroup other Scriptures that teach this simple yet profound truth.

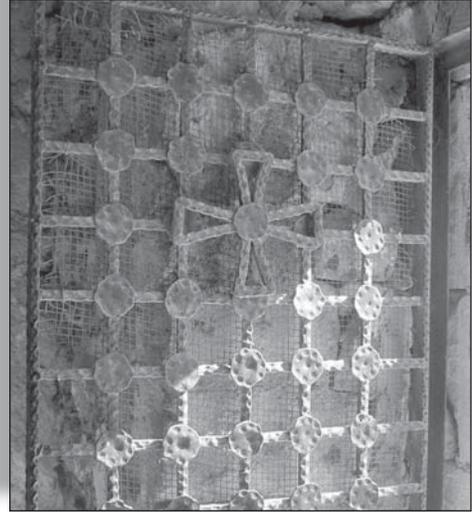
Gather together what you have learned in this study. How can SBCC guard against becoming legalistic and setting up hurdles for salvation?

³ While scholarly opinion varies, Paul is most likely writing Galatians before he gets to Jerusalem and the events recorded in Acts 15. Hence there is no mention of the letter from the apostles and elders because it has not yet taken place.

STUDY NINE: ANTIOCH: THE SENDING CHURCH

*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul
for the work to which I have called
them. Acts 13:2*

In modern evangelical Christianity, we have our own “celebrities”—Rick Warren, Billy Graham, Beth Moore, James Dobson, Chris Tomlin.... As a result, certain communities have thus also attained a certain notoriety. For example, Colorado Springs, CO is home to the headquarters of over 100 Christian organizations; *US News & World Report* calls it the “Vatican of Evangelical Christianity.” Wheaton, Illinois has long been the home of Wheaton College, the premiere Christian college in our country. The town itself is also the location for over 20 Christian ministries and countless churches. Orange County has birthed many megachurches and movements: Calvary Chapel, EV Free Fullerton (formerly pastored by Chuck Swindoll), and of course Saddleback Church (led by Rick Warren). Organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ, New Tribes Missions, and R.C. Sproul have planted their main offices in Orlando, FL.



Door to 12th c. Church, Antioch
Photo: Maura Conn

This is not a phenomenon unique to our media-saturated 21st century. As Wayne Meeks says in *The Urban Environment of Pauline Christianity*, “...within a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement.” The “superstar” cities of early Christianity will be familiar to us: Rome, Corinth, Ephesus... and Antioch.

Other than Jerusalem, there is no other city in the history of the early church more significant than Antioch:

- *The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. (Acts 11:26)*
- All 3 of Paul’s missionary journeys departed and ended here.
- Controversy between Jews and Gentiles first erupted within the church here. (Acts 15)

- Many scholars think Matthew (and possibly Luke) wrote their gospels in Antioch.
- Paul parted with Barnabas here (to be later reconciled) over a difference of opinion about including John Mark in their missionary travels. (Acts 15:36–41)
- It is believed that Peter and Luke both preached in the church in Antioch. Can you imagine the homegroup studies that came out of those sermons?!

Where do we begin with such a treasure trove of study? When the Book of Acts was written, the church in Antioch was only about 50 years old. It was unique in that it was the first church with a very mixed congregation of Jews & Greeks. (See Acts 13:1—the church leaders in Antioch included a Cypriot, a black African and an adopted brother of Herod!) Interestingly, the Greeks had come into the church through early participation in the Jewish community in Antioch. They were called *God-fearers* in Acts, seeking after God but not conforming in all ways to Jewish law.

Before proceeding, read two significant sections in Acts about the church in Antioch. As you read, make sure you jot down any questions, details, or points that stand out to you. Find a map in the back of your Bible, or in a Bible atlas. Locate Antioch on the map, and trace the travels of the church's first missionaries.

Acts 11:19–30

Acts 13:1–3, 14:21–28 (Read everything in between to get a sense of Paul & Barnabas' first missionary journey.)

Background

It is important to differentiate between the Antioch we'll be studying here (also known as Antioch-on-the-Orontes, or Syrian Antioch) and Pisidian Antioch. All the "Antiochs" of the Roman Empire were founded by Seleucus I (312–280 BC) in honor of his father, Antiochus.

This Antioch was the largest city of the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria in Egypt. It was a bustling maritime city with its own port, located about 300 miles north of Jerusalem in ancient Syria. It is now known as Antakya in modern-day Turkey, near Syria's border.

Interestingly, Rome, Ephesus and Antioch were the only cities in the Roman Empire with street lighting! Historians believe Mark Antony & Cleopatra were married here. Though geographically small, at its peak its population may have reached 450,000! This was enormous for the ancient world. Scholars say that “Antioch was truly a city where East met West.” (Fant & Reddish)

“Little Christs”

Return to Acts 11:19–30. Clearly, the church here emerged out of dynamic circumstances and painful persecution in Jerusalem (see Acts 6–7). In Acts 11:22–24, we get a picture of one of church history’s unsung heroes, Barnabas. What qualities in this description stand out to you? Which one would you like to grow in? Share with the group.

What a privilege for the Antiochene church to be taught for an entire year by Paul & Barnabas! (vs. 26) As we noted earlier, the believers were first called Christians (“little Christs”) at Antioch. It probably grew out of casual sharing and witnessing by those early Greek believers as they talked with their pagan neighbors. Since the goal of believers is to be like Christ, that was how they were described.

When were you first called a Christian? Give a one-minute account (time it!) of how you became a believer—when your faith became your own. Be ready to share it with the group.

Look closely at Acts 11:27–30. From the very beginning, Paul knew that it was crucial to church life and unity among the various churches to bear one another’s burdens: *The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.* (vs. 29) How do you see this happening at SBCC? How can we keep growing, individually and corporately, in this regard?

The Sending Church: On a Mission

Turn to Acts 13. Thus begins a historic movement in the church that continues to this day. The first missionary journey embarked from Antioch. Previously, the gospel had spread through conversation, relationship, and stressful situations that forced the early believers to disperse and flee persecution. Here, for the first time, Barnabas and Saul (soon to be called Paul, his Greek name) intentionally set out to preach the gospel in a focused effort, beyond their familiar settings. This is in fulfillment of the commission given by Jesus before he ascended:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

As noted earlier, Antioch was the starting point for Paul's other two missionary journeys described in Acts as well. (see 15:40ff and 18:23ff) Clearly, Antioch was the first "sending church." In reflecting on the church in Antioch at this time, Ben Patterson says, "World missions are launched, not in Jerusalem, but in a Gentile city, as believers worship and pray."

As believers come to faith, disciples are mentored and shaped, leadership is fostered and extended, and worship enlarges, the Word naturally goes forth. John Piper describes this boldly in his book *Let the Nations Be Glad*.

Missions exist because worship doesn't... When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.... Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory...But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can't commend what you do not cherish. (Piper, p.11)

Do you agree, or disagree, with Piper? Why?

We gain a lifetime's worth of lessons from the missionaries' experiences as recorded in Acts. Briefly, note the various ways people respond to the gospel proclamation during this first journey:

- Acts 13:6–8

Antioch: The Sending Church

- Acts 13:42–45
- Acts 14:1–5
- Acts 14:8–18

What do you learn about evangelism from these passages?

How can you apply at least one of these lessons to your life this week?

How can this section inform your homegroup's prayers for the missionaries SBCC supports?

The second missionary journey of Paul & Barnabas begins in Acts 15:36. As Paul proposed,

Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.

Paul is a good missionary and pastor! He's following up on the work he started, seeking to grow deep the spiritual roots of those he preached to on the first missionary journey. As a sending church, Antioch must have had a clear vision of what it meant to take the gospel to the ends of earth—and have their efforts bear long-term fruit.

Clearly, outreach *and* discipleship are both a part of missions. What are some ways you have experienced these two aspects of ministry?

Outreach

Discipleship

Santa Barbara Community Church aspires to be a sending church like Antioch. Look back through this study, and pray over the various aspects of missions and church life you studied this week for our own church body. Pray for SBCC:

- To be encouragers like Barnabas
- To be generous in supporting the church around the world
- To send out missionaries “to the ends of the earth,” both locally and internationally
- To follow up on the work we’ve started, and call believers to deeper discipleship

STUDY TEN:
THESSALONICA AND BEREΑ:
THE IMPORTANCE OF THE
SCRIPTURES

They received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Acts 17:11



Cornerstone From Ancient Basilica, Thessalonica
Photo: Kelly Soifer

On the second missionary journey Paul and his traveling companions come to the cities of Thessalonica and Berea. After a severe beating and a night in a Philippian jail the group began the hundred-mile journey to Thessalonica. It was in this harbor town, the capital of Macedonia, that Paul finds a synagogue and begins to teach for three consecutive Sabbaths.¹ After their time in Thessalonica this band of missionaries travels the fifty miles to Berea.

Read Acts 17:1–15 and the story of evangelism in Thessalonica and Berea. It is obvious that central to the story of both cities is the place of Scripture in evangelism. As you read make note of every time the Scriptures are mentioned. What were the attitudes of both speaker and listener to the Scripture?

The presence of a synagogue in Thessalonica was a ready-made opportunity to proclaim the gospel. Paul, the visiting rabbi, would be invited on Sabbath to address the congregation. Acts 17:2–3 describes how Paul approached the Scripture and how he used it in his teaching. What do these three terms tell you about the Bible? What do they tell you about the importance of the Scripture? What do they tell you about how the Bible should be used?

¹ It is clear from the New Testament letters of 1 & 2 Thessalonians that Paul and his friends stayed in Thessalonica for several months. Luke, here in Acts 17, concentrates on his Jewish outreach in the synagogue before Paul went on to speak to the Gentiles.

- *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures
- *explained*
- *proving* that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead

The Old Testament was Paul's text. But we are left to wonder what particular Scriptures Paul used. While we are not sure, it is likely that Paul used Scriptures that he had already quoted in earlier sermons found in Acts. This would include the texts listed below. How would you *reason*, *explain* and *prove* from these Scriptures?

- Deuteronomy 21:22–23
- Psalms 2:1–7
- Psalms 16:8–11
- Psalms 110:1
- Psalms 118:22
- Isaiah 52–53

According to Acts 17:4, what was the response to Paul's Old Testament Bible lesson?

In verses 5–9 the Jews are upset and start a riot. Why?

Have you ever seen a strong negative reaction the presentation of the truth of the Scriptures? Be ready to share this with your Homegroup.

Paul's example in Thessalonica is instructive for how we present the gospel in Santa Barbara. What place does the Bible play in how you talk to others about your faith? To tell others about how God has changed our life is good and appropriate. But if we leave out the objective Scriptures and simply tell our own story we miss an important tool in evangelism. Do you feel more comfortable telling your own story of conversion and life with God or with explaining the gospel using the Bible? Why is this the case?

To be fair in this discussion, it was somewhat easy to start a discussion of the Old Testament in a synagogue. The people understood the Scriptures and were used to hearing them read and discussed. Our context in Santa Barbara is much different. Many modern people, who have little or no exposure to the Bible, find the Scriptures confusing and hard to understand. How could we learn to use the Bible in explaining our faith in a way that would make sense to those unfamiliar with it? What have you learned using the Bible with modern people who are uninitiated to the Bible?

In Berea, once again, Paul begins his evangelism in the synagogue. How did the reception of the Scriptures in Berea differ from that in Thessalonica?

John Stott comments about the Berean response to the Scriptures.

*They combined receptivity with critical questioning. The verb for 'examine' (anakrino) is used of judicial investigations, as of Herod examining Jesus, the Sanhedrin Peter and John (4:9), and Felix Paul (24:8). It implies integrity and absence of bias. Ever since then the adjective 'Berean' has been applied to people who study the Scriptures with impartiality and care. (Stott, *The Spirit, The Church & The World*, p. 274)*

Looking at Acts 17:4 and 12 it is evident that both Jews and Gentiles responded to the Scriptures and the message of salvation they contained. Do you find yourself trusting the authority of the Scriptures when you talk to friends and co-workers about Jesus? Why? Why not?

Do you have the ability and confidence to use your Bible to explain who Jesus is and how a person could be saved? Could you easily find a dozen or so portions of Scripture that would explain what Christian faith is? Be ready in your Homegroup to spend a few minutes talking about this and helping each other be prepared to do this.

Read 2 Timothy 3:14–17. What does this text tell us about the purpose and usefulness of Scripture?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

At this point in our summer study we have spent a lot of time looking at first century churches. Think back over your summer Bible reading. How have you seen the importance of Scripture play out in the life of the different churches we have examined?

What can you do in your life to recommit yourself to the importance of Scripture?

Is SBCC a Berean church that receives the message with great eagerness and examines the Scripture to see if what is being taught is true?

STUDY ELEVEN:
ATHENS: A LESSON IN EVANGELISM
ACTS 17:16–32

*Men of Athens! I see that
in every way you are very
religious. Acts 17:22*

“Evangelism.” Let that word sink
in. What thoughts and feelings are
conjured up as you contemplate it?



Female Statues From the Erechtheion on the Acropolis, Athens
Photo: Maura Conn

Depending upon our backgrounds, we probably have a variety of responses to the above question.¹ The Greek verb, *euangelizesthai*, means “to announce good news.” This verb is found 52 times in the New Testament, and its corresponding noun (*euangelion*, or “good news”) occurs 72 times.

Our biblical role model for a healthy view of evangelism is the apostle Paul. Listen to what he tells his young protégé, Timothy:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.²

In other words, “*euangelizesthai!*” Tell the story! While the New Testament is replete with examples of Jesus, his disciples and followers announcing this Good News, evangelism is never defined in terms of successful results. In every case we are shown that, when the

¹ In her book, *Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World*, Rebecca Pippert shares that she long labored under the view that personal evangelism meant “offending people for Jesus’ sake.”

² 2 Tim. 4:1–2

good news of Christ is proclaimed, some will respond with repentance and faith, and others will respond with either indifference or outright rejection. God controls the outcome. Consider our text for this week's study:

Read Acts 17:16–34

As you consider this story, try to break it down into 3 parts. Write down what you find.

What Paul saw:

What Paul felt:

What Paul did:

Verse 16 The city of Athens is described as “full of idols.” The idea conveyed in the Greek New Testament is that the city is “under” them or “swamped” by them. The proliferation of idols in this great city is shocking, even to Paul. Historians write that there were more gods in Athens than in all the rest of the country, and one Roman satirist stated that “it was easier to find a god there than a man.”³

Temples, shrines, statues and altars were countless. There were images of Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana and Aesculapius. It is said that, in the Parthenon, there stood a huge gold and ivory statue of Athena, “whose gleaming spear-point was visible forty miles away.”⁴

Paul had hard evidence of idolatry all around him. These were images that could be seen and touched. Idolatry, then and now, however, goes beyond the tangible and palpable.

What is idolatry? Write your definition below:

What kinds of idolatry do you see in Santa Barbara?

³ Conybear & Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*.

⁴ John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p. 277.

What idols do you struggle with in your own life?

Verse 17 Idolatry demands a response. Paul was so troubled by what he saw that he took action; he began to discuss the matter with “the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks.” Interestingly, he does not choose a private home, or some other sequestered place for these discussions. He holds them “in the marketplace,” right in the middle of the action in a bustling city.

What happened as a result of these very public conversations?

What are your experiences of being a vocal representative of Christ? What have you learned, and where do you feel God stretching you in this area?

Verses 18–21 Athens was a city that put a high value on religion and philosophy. We see Paul engaging in discussion with three different groups: the Jews & God-fearing Greeks; the Epicurean philosophers⁵; and the Stoic philosophers.⁶

As you read vv. 18–21, what do you notice about the spiritual climate of Athens? What similarities and differences do you see between Athens, and our culture today?

Similarities

Differences

⁵ Epicureans considered the gods to be so remote as to take no interest in, and have no influence on, human affairs. The creation and sustaining of the world was due to random chance, and death brought annihilation. The consequential thinking of this philosophy was that life should be lived for pleasure, i.e., “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!”

⁶ The Stoic philosophers acknowledged a supreme god, but viewed this god as the “world soul”. Stoicism is best described as “material pantheism”. They believed that the world was determined by fate, and humans must pursue their duty, living by reason, self-sufficiency, and the pursuit of virtue. As the Epicureans lived by a credo of pleasure seeking, the Stoics lived by a credo of fatalism.

A campus minister made a piercingly true observation about our era when he said “It is all right today to search for truth, as long as you don’t find it.”⁷

Respond to this quote. How do you see this played out among the people you know?

What personal response do you think God may be calling out in you?

Verses 22–34 Paul is summoned to a meeting of the Areopagus⁸ to explain himself. Read through Paul’s response carefully, in as many translations as you have available.

As you think about God’s call on the church (and on all of us as his church in the world), to “preach the good news,” what do you notice about Paul’s *first* statement at the Areopagus (v. 22)? How does this impact your view of evangelism?

As you read through vv. 22–34, notice the scope of what Paul communicates about the one true and living God. He proclaims God as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father and Judge. Find the verses that correspond:

- Creator:
- Sustainer:
- Ruler:
- Father:
- Judge:

⁷ Quoted in Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials*, p. 170

⁸ The word “Areopagus” means literally “the hill (*pagos*) of Ares (*the Greek equivalent of ‘Mars’*)”. This is why this section of scripture is often referred to as Paul’s “Mars Hill” sermon. The Areopagus was at one time a judicial court, but by Paul’s time it had become a council which existed as guardian of the city’s religion, morals and education. Often this council would hear a “case” to determine if it was disruptive or antithetical to Athenian thinking or values.

Paul's message is comprehensive. Our evangelical witness to the world will always be multi-faceted, and our opportunities to present the "whole" gospel in one telling may be few. God calls us to come alongside people and to share Christ with them by our loving actions as well as by our words. However, God calls his Church to "preach the Word" and that Word is inclusive of a full view of God, as we see in this text.

Beyond being comprehensive in his message, Paul is passionate about his convictions. Respond to the following, from John Stott:

Why is it that, in spite of the great needs and opportunities of our day, the church slumbers peacefully on, and that so many Christians are deaf and dumb, deaf to Christ's commission and tongue-tied in testimony? I think the major reason is this: we do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt. ... We constantly pray 'Hallowed be your Name', but we do not seem to mean it, or to care that his Name is so widely profaned. (Stott, p. 290)

Do you agree with this view? If so, why you think we are in that state? Disagree? Explain.

Too often Christians see evangelism as a "gift" (either you have it or you don't), rather than a universal *response* to what God has done for us. This response is—like worship, giving our money to the poor, being part of a church—a part of God's will for us. Think and pray about what your personal "Areopagus" might be. Share this with your group, and pray for each other!

STUDY TWELVE:
THESSALONICA—LEFT BEHIND?
THE WARNING OF SECOND COMING CONFUSION



Window to Ancient Church, Athens
Photo: Maura Conn

He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 1 Thessalonians 5:10

Try and put yourself in the place of these early believers in Thessalonica. You are in a young church that Paul and Silas founded on their second missionary journey. While we are not sure of the exact duration of their stay in the city, it was probably not more than three months. This is not a lot of time for the church to be established, taught and on its way to spiritual maturity. Many of the converts came from paganism and had little Biblical knowledge.

It is in this context that the church in Thessalonica becomes confused and discouraged about the second coming of Christ and what happens when believers die. Some had misunderstood the nearness of Christ's return and ceased to work (2 Thessalonians 3:6–15). People had died since the beginning of the church and the believers wondered what has happened to their friends. The church had even been the victim of a cruel hoax. Someone had written a false letter, probably signing Paul's name, and taught that Christ had already returned! (2 Thess. 2:2) Timothy, Paul's faithful co-worker, visits Thessalonica and brings a report of their confusion back to Paul who is in Corinth. It is from Corinth that Paul writes 1 and 2 Thessalonians.¹

¹ 1 and 2 Thessalonians are two of the earliest New Testament letters.

We live in a day of rampant speculation concerning the time and circumstances of Christ's return. Walk in to any Costco and you will see stacks of the astoundingly popular *Left Behind* books, a fictional series written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. These books that ponder end times scenarios have sold over 62 million copies! Why is there such a pre-occupation with the events surrounding the return of Christ?

The interest in the return of Christ springs primarily from two sources. The first is the reality of our own impending death. Like the believers at Thessalonica, we all wonder what becomes of us when we die and what the future holds. The second comes from the mouth of Jesus who spoke often about his return. He frequently told his disciples to be on the lookout for his return. Matthew 24 and Mark 13 are lengthy parallel passages where Jesus taught his followers about his return.²

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12. Try to not get lost in the details. What is clear in these verses? What is the big point Paul is trying to make to these confused believers in Thessalonica?

After reading these two passages from 1 and 2 Thessalonians you may be thinking, “No wonder the church was confused!” Yes, these are difficult portions of Scripture. Clarity on the details will elude us. Part of the confusion from these two passages is because Paul is expanding teachings that he gave orally when he was in Thessalonica. *Don't you remember when I was with you I used to tell you these things?* (2 Thess. 2:5) Even New Testament scholars get a headache when working with these passages, which are considered among the most difficult in the New Testament. Our goal in this study is to glean the big picture and in light of this big picture *encourage one another and build each other up.* (1 Thess. 5:11)

Make note of every word of encouragement you can find in these passages. What are the reasons that Paul gives to encourage the believers in Thessalonica concerning death and the return of Christ?

² The Bible is full of teaching on the second coming of Christ. According to one scholar there are 1,845 references to the second coming, 260 New Testament passages, 1 out of 30 NT verses, and it is mentioned in 23 out of the 27 NT books.

How do you find comfort and encouragement in these promises?

The Greek and Roman world of Paul's day was hopeless. The prevailing Greek philosophies of the day held out little hope for the future of the body after death. Indeed, apart from Christian faith there was no solid basis for hope in connection with the after-life. Think about your own impending death. The statistics on death are impressive! What is the basis of your hope? Do you think about this hope often or does the speed of modern life squeeze out contemplation of your future?

What was prompting the Christians in Thessalonica to think about these issues?

The death of believers is often compared to sleep. (See Matt. 27:52, John 11:11–13, Acts 7:60, 1 Cor. 7:39, 15:6, 18) The metaphor is especially appropriate for Christians because of their assured bodily resurrection. When Christ returns what will happen to those who have *fallen asleep*? How was this information to help the Thessalonians not to *grieve*?

In 1 Thessalonians 4:17 we read of how both the dead and living believers will participate in the return of Christ. New Testament scholar Robert Thomas explains.

Only “after that” (v. 17) will living Christians “be caught up” for the meeting with Christ. The interval separating the two groups will be infinitesimally small by human reckoning. Yet the dead in Christ will go first. They will be the first to share in the glory of his visit. Then the living among whom Paul still hoped to be will be suddenly snatched away (“caught up”). This term in Latin, raptus, is the source of the popular designation of this event as the “rapture.” So sudden will it be that Paul likens it to the blinking of the eye (1 Cor. 15:52). In this rapid sequence the living will undergo an immediate change from mortality to immortality (1 Cor. 15:52, 53), after which they will be unsusceptible to death. (Thomas, Expositors Bible Commentary, p. 279)

This return of Christ will be like a *thief in the night* (1 Thess. 5:2). In other words no one will be expecting it. Jesus said much the same thing. *So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.* (Matthew 24:44) In light of this sudden coming of Christ, Paul goes on in 1 Thessalonians 5:3–11 to tell the believers how to live presently in the world. What are his instructions in these verses?

Do you find yourself living with a life-changing expectation of Christ's return? Why? Why not? What could you do in your Christian discipleship to live in eager expectation of Jesus' return?

Respond to this statement by Anthony Hoekema.

*The expectation of Christ's Second Advent is a most important aspect of New Testament eschatology [study of the end times]—so much so, in fact, that the faith of the New Testament church is dominated [emphasis added] by its expectation. Every book of the New Testament points us to the return of Christ and urges us to live in such a way as to be always ready for that return . . . This same lively expectation of Christ's return should mark the church of Jesus Christ today. If this expectation is no longer present, there is something radically wrong. (Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, p. 109)*

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, there are many warnings about what will transpire around *the day of the Lord*. What are these warnings? Look for words like *deceive*, *lawlessness*, *counterfeit*, and *delusion*.

These verses introduce the **man of lawlessness**. For the last two thousand years there has been abundant speculation as to the identity of this individual. Popes, Roman emperors, and dictators have been suggested. Suffice it to say, we don't know the identity

of this individual. Some even think this is not a historical person at all. There are good reasons to believe that this *man of lawlessness* described by Paul is the same person as the antichrist mentioned by John in 1 John 2:18. While we do not know the identity of this person we do know something of his character. How would you describe this *man of lawlessness*?

In 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7 we find mention of a restrainer who will hold back the power and influence of lawlessness. Again the identity of this restrainer will elude us. Suggestions include, the preaching of the gospel, the Jewish state, the Holy Spirit, the binding of Satan, the church, and human government! The point is that Satanic-inspired rebellion and lawlessness is, for a time, being restrained.

As you think about the end of this age and some of the events described in the Bible do you find yourself confident, fearful, secure, or apprehensive?

Gather together your thoughts from studying these two passages from 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Again, think big picture. How is Paul attempting to comfort and encourage these believers? Do you find yourself optimistic and encouraged about your future?

SERMON NOTES