

## “Covenantal Priority”

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*This is the ninth of 18 articles in a series entitled “Who Needs the Church?”*

*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal 6:10)*

Can one be too committed to the church? The question is raised by those who fear we may be committed to our church to the exclusion of other believers and the friendship with unbelievers. Are we in danger of becoming a Christian ghetto? aloof from outsiders, isolated from unbelievers, cloistered to the point of irrelevance? This is not an unimportant question, especially if considered historically. Variations on the monastic impulse have appeared and reappeared throughout the centuries. From hermit monks, to communal monks, to Benedict, to the Cistercians, to the Jesuits, to the Anabaptists such as the Mennonites and Amish, to the fundamentalists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, separation from the world has been a temptation and a strategy for Christians.

### **In, not of the world**

The old formula is a good one: be *in* the world, not *of* the world. Jesus commands us to be light and salt *in the world* of darkness and corruption. We are to be “a city set on a hill” that cannot be hidden (Mt 5:13, 14). Jesus commands,

*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Mt 5:16)*

Our light is to shine “before others” who are able to “see (our) good works” with the salutary result of God’s glory. Similarly the Apostle Paul, undoubtedly echoing Jesus’ teaching, instructs us to be

*<sup>15</sup>blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, <sup>16</sup>holding fast to the word of life. (Phil 2:15-16a)*

Note where he places us: “*in the midst* of a crooked and twisted generation,” yet “as lights *in the world.*” Elsewhere he intends that we *should* “associate” with the “sexually immoral of this world... the greedy and swindlers” and “idolaters,” since to avoid them we “would need to go out of this world,” a thing not to be done (1 Cor 5:9, 10). It is only when such evil-doers claim to be Christian brethren that we are not to “associate” with them, “not even to eat with such a one” (1 Cor 5:11). Clearly the implication is that we would have significant relationships with worldlings. We are to be *in the world.*

On the other hand, we are not to be *of the world.* Hence, in Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer,” He prays, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world,” but that we be protected “from the evil

one” (Jn 17:15). Indeed, “I have sent them *into the world*” (Jn 17:18). Yet “the world has hated them because they are not of the world just as I am *not of the world*” (Jn 17:14). Again,

*They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. (Jn 17:16)*

We are to remain separate from the world and its ways. We are to “love not the world or the things of the world” (1 Jn 2:15). Most emphatically the Apostle Paul, citing Leviticus 26:12 (!), commands us,

*Therefore go out from their midst,  
and be separate from them, says the Lord,  
and touch no unclean thing. (2 Cor 6:17; cf Rev 18:4, 5)*

### **Covenantal priority**

How do we put these two strands of being *in* the world but not *of* the world together? We do so by establishing a covenantal priority. Our first and primary obligation is to our Christian brothers and sisters to whom we are bound by covenant vows. We are part of the same family, not by birth, but by covenant. This priority is perhaps most clearly expressed by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 6:10.

*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal 6:10)*

We are to aim to “do good to everyone,” believer and non-believer. Yet the priority is “the household of faith.” They “especially” are the objects of our love and care. For example, the charitable, diaconal ministry of the church does not aim at alleviating all human suffering, but suffering within the church. The widows that receive the care of the church are Christian widows, and not just any Christian widow, but one “having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work” (1 Tim 5:9b-10). That is a pretty high bar for being on the receiving end of diaconal help. The priority for believers is the faithful within the covenant community.

The “one anothers” of our previous study also are directed to members of churches (e.g. Rome, Ephesus, Colossae, Corinth, Galatia, etc.) regarding *their fellow members*. Sometimes they explicitly are directed to give to believers and churches outside their congregations, as when the Apostle Paul urges the Corinthians to give to the needy Jerusalem church, even to give generously as the churches of Macedonia (e.g. Philippi) had done (e.g. 2 Cor 8-9; cf Rom 15:25-28; 1 Cor 16:1-4). However, this is the exception that proves the rule. Unless otherwise indicated, the Apostles are directing us (in their 28 one anothers) to love, care for, and bear the burdens of our fellow church members. It is not that we are to withhold care and kindness from other believers or unbelievers. Of course we should be Good Samaritans to everyone with whom we come into contact. Rather, we are being guided in establishing priorities and ordering our commitments accordingly.

Can we be too committed to the church? Yes, if it means that we are either isolated from outsiders or withhold kindness to them. Yet frankly, I’ve not been aware of this as a significant problem. Indeed, I don’t recall seeing anyone in the last 30 years who was too committed to the

church. No one. On the other hand, I've seen lots of believers compromised by love of the world. I've seen lots of believers failing to "love one another" because all of their energies are poured into their "friends," from whom they derive social satisfaction and benefit. I've seen lots of believers who are (typically, to be honest) worldly Christians or outright worldlings. My priority, that which ought to receive the benefit of my thoughts, time, energy, and love should be the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the Jew and the Gentile, hip and the unhip, the cool and the uncool, the connected and the unconnected of my own church home, and then of the broader Christian community.

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