

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1: The Idolatry of Love

Main Question: How do our common cultural conceptions of love today hinder our acceptance of church membership and discipline?

STEPS IN THE ARGUMENT:

- 1) Doing a doctrine of the church requires us to consider our cultural baggage.
- 2) *Individualism* has left us detached, which sent us searching for a love that makes us feel complete. We want churches to do the same.
- 3) *Consumerism* has caused us to focus on the desirability of the object of love, rather than on the process of loving. We view churches like products which satisfy us or not.
- 4) *Commitment phobia* takes commitment out of love and love becomes about what's advantageous to me. The idea of commitment is removed from our view of churches.
- 5) *Skepticism* removes all judgment from love, causing us to expect unconditional acceptance from churches. Pragmatism also results.
- 6) But what is individualism really? It's a hatred of authority. And behind the hatred of authority is a diminished God.
- 7) Church membership, then, begins with repentance.

Main Answer: We have made love into an idol that serves us, and so redefined love into something that never imposes judgments, conditions, or binding attachments.

Chapter 2: The Nature of Love

Main Questions: What is God's love like and why does it offend us? What's the connection between our understanding of God's love and church membership?

STEPS IN THE ARGUMENT:

- 1) In ways we don't expect, God's love both attracts and repels us, which means God's gospel and God's church also attract and repel us.

- 2) The doctrine of God's love is more complicated biblically and theologically than people realize. Theologians before Luther centered God's love upon God.
- 3) Many theologians since Luther have opted for a reductionistic understanding of God's love—love merely as unconditional gift. This common evangelical understanding of love today fundamentally changes the purpose of the church and the shape of church membership.
- 4) The Scriptures show that God's love is holy—it centers on himself.
- 5) The Scriptures show that God's purposes in redemption are also holy, centering on himself.
- 6) Therefore, we can define love as “the lover's affirmation of and affection for the beloved and the beloved's good in the Holy.”
- 7) God's love, God's gospel, and God's church offend us because they all center on him.
- 8) God's love and God's judgment work in concert, not in opposition. This also is offensive.
- 9) A church is a church that seeks out the Holy to affirm and separate it from the unholy.

Main Answers: God's love creates and affirms us, but it does so for the purposes of winning praise to himself. The holiness or God-centeredness of God's love offends us because it brings both salvation and judgment. Church membership and discipline therefore offend us because they picture both salvation and judgment, and draw a line between them.

Chapter 3: The Rule of Love

Main Questions: What is authority? How does it relate to love? And what role does it play in the church?

STEPS IN THE ARGUMENT:

- 1) The idea of authority frightens us, for understandable reasons
- 2) Therefore, many church leaders and pastors today present us with a vision of the loving community of relationships which downplays the idea of authority.
- 3) Yet God is not a God of just relationships, he's a God of authority, and authority is what holds the church together.
- 4) What is authority and how does it relate to love? Authority is the authorization we have from God to create and give order to life.
- 5) What is submission and how does it relate to love? Submission is love for God and giving oneself to the pursuit of his glory.

- 6) At the same time, we rightly mistrust authority because sin, in its very essence, is the abuse of the authority God has given his creatures.
- 7) Christ's life, death, and resurrection present the world with a picture of authority redeemed, an authority which he then hands to his people.
- 8) The local church is where Christians enact their submission to Christ and practice his loving rule toward others.
- 9) The local church is a new reality, with marked-off borders and a center.
- 10) Yet we must always keep in mind that authority in this fallen world is both complex and mixed.

Main Answers: Authority, grounded in holy love, creates life. It creates a whole new reality that is both marked off and shaped.

Chapter 4: The Charter of Love

Main Questions: What authority does Christ give the local church and why?

STEPS IN THE ARGUMENT:

- 1) In this fallen world, hypocrites and heretics confuse the world about the gospel and the nature of Christ's love. Therefore, Christ authorizes the church to mark off the people of God.
- 2) In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus demonstrates concern over who is identified with his name and who is not, because identifying with him is identifying with the heavenly Father.
- 3) In Matthew 16, 18, and 28, Jesus gave the apostles and the apostolic church the power of the keys. This authorized the church to guard the gospel, to affirm credible professions, to unite such professors to itself, to oversee their discipleship, and to exclude hypocrites.
- 4) Even with all its imperfections, the church represents Jesus on earth. It gives witness to his coming salvation and judgment.
- 5) The church, therefore, is Christ's proxy on earth.
- 6) The fact that the church is Christ's proxy on earth means that the Christian must submit to the church on earth, which means submitting to the local church.
- 7) How then can we formally define local church membership and discipline? As the forming or breaking of a covenant between a Christian and a church.
- 8) This covenant between a Christian and a local church does not remove a Christian's responsibilities to other Christians, but it does give a Christian more responsibility over the members of his or her church.

Main Answers: Christ authorizes the local church to proclaim and protect the gospel, to recognize or affirm those who belong to him, to unite them to itself, to oversee their discipleship, and to exclude any imposters. He gives the local church this authority in order to protect and display his gospel in a fallen world which continually misunderstands and misportrays his gospel love.

Chapter 5: The Covenant of Love

Main Question: What exactly is this commitment or “covenant” of local church membership?

STEPS IN THE ARGUMENT:

- 1) We can answer the question of what a “local church covenant” is by considering the relationship between Christ’s “charter” (described in chapter 4) and his new covenant.
- 2) Church membership involves identifying ourselves with Christ and Christ’s people. The work of mutual identification occurs through covenants.
- 3) In the Old Testament, God broadly used covenants to identify a people with himself and establish his kingdom.
- 4) In the New Testament, he sent his Son to establish a better, effectual covenant. This new covenant, which unites us to Christ representationally, by the Spirit, and by faith, is the foundation of the church.
- 5) The “covenant” of local church membership is what results when Christ’s charter draws together and marks off Christ’s new covenant people.
- 6) As with the covenants of the Old Testament, the covenantal commitment shared by the members of the local church serves nine specific purposes.
- 7) The covenant commitment of the local church makes the invisible new covenant visible. It’s an earthly symbol, sign, or analogy of this wonderful heavenly reality.

Main Answer: The commitment believers make to one another to form a local church is a covenant-like commitment. Since Christ has identified them with him through his new covenant, and since he has authorized them to identify themselves with him through his charter, they covenant together in such a fashion that his name is protected and their good is promoted.

Chapter 6: The Affirmation and Witness of Love

Main Questions: How should a church responsibly affirm, oversee, and remove members? Should it account for cultural differences in these activities?

STEPS IN THE ARGUMENT:

- 1) Many people today exaggerate the importance of cultural difference; still, we should pay some attention to cultural differences. This measured approach to cultural differences can be illustrated by three churches in three different nations.
- 2) In other words, churches should pay attention to how complex the culture is as well as the society's favor or disfavor toward Christianity, which requires churches to ensure that both church and Christian have the opportunity to adequately "explain" themselves.
- 3) At the same time, churches everywhere are tasked with marking off a holy people, which will always be opposed by the world, the flesh, and the Devil.
- 4) In order to responsibly affirm members, a church should ensure that prospective members understand who they are committing to through any necessary classes, doctrinal statements, and words to guard the Lord's Table; the church should also ensure that prospective members adequately grasp the gospel.
- 5) The goal of member oversight is to present a credible witness for Christ on earth. The whole church, leaders and members, participate in this gospel-grounded, discipleship-driven care through the ministry of the Word.
- 6) Since a church covenant is a two-way commitment, both church and member must consent to the end of the relationship. Churches should formally discipline members who prove unrepentantly unfaithful in their discipleship to Christ.

Main Answers: To a limited measure, churches should account for culture differences, particularly in terms of a society's complexity and bearing toward Christianity. At the same time, churches should uniformly affirm, oversee, and remove members with a continual mind for its work of giving witness to Christ's holy name.

Chapter 7: The Submission and Freedom of Love

Main Question: What does it mean to submit to a local church? Are there limits to the church's authority over the individual?

STEPS IN THE ARGUMENT:

- 1) Christian freedom is not freedom from restraint, but the Spirit-given freedom to want what God wants and conform one's life to his.
- 2) Since Christian freedom can only be given by the Spirit, and not the flesh, the godly use of authority in the church will not seek to coerce individuals by the flesh; it will appeal to gospel realities given by the Spirit.
- 3) When individuals find themselves under an abusive authority, they should always trust God's provision and purposes; if possible, they should flee.
- 4) Philippians 2 presents the model for submission in the local church: Christ's incarnation and crucifixion.
- 5) Christians emulate Christ's example by submitting to one another physically, socially, affectionately, financially, vocationally, ethically, and spiritually.
- 6) When the church contravenes Scripture or the gospel's witness, an individual should speak and act in dissent, but only reverently and in the fear of God.
- 7) Our submission to the local church can be well articulated in a written church covenant, which serves to remind a church of its covenantal commitments to one another.

Main Answer: Submitting to the church means submitting our whole selves to the church for its good and for Christ's glory, just as Christ surrendered himself for our good and the Father's glory.