



LOVE

THE ONES
WHO
DRIVE YOU

CRAZY

**EIGHT TRUTHS FOR PURSUING
UNITY IN YOUR CHURCH**

JAMIE DUNLOP

“One of my favorite pastimes is reading the sermons of preachers who have long since gone to their reward. And one of my least favorite realizations along the way has been that few of the churches these preachers once led so well survived much longer. In fact, some of the churches I have attended in my own lifetime—some of the churches where I was once taught so well—have already decayed and been disbanded. In so many cases, it was not false doctrine or false teachers that undermined the church but a simple failure to love—to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It’s for this reason I’m so grateful for this book and for Jamie Dunlop’s clarion call for you—yes, you!—to pursue unity in your local church. May God use it to convict his people and protect his church.”

Tim Challies, author, *Seasons of Sorrow*

“Needed! Yes, that’s what I thought through reading each chapter of Jamie Dunlop’s *Love the Ones Who Drive You Crazy*. I needed this book during four decades of pastoring. I need it now as a church member. Dunlop takes difficult situations we face in the local church and helps us see the power of Christ alone to truly love one another in Christ’s body. I highly recommend this book!”

Phil A. Newton, Director of Pastoral Care and Mentoring, Pillar Network;
author, *40 Questions about Pastoral Ministry and Shepherding the Pastor*

“You don’t have to be a member of a local church for many Sundays before you discover that the people in the pews around you can be challenging. Their social media posts make you cringe, their parenting choices make you concerned, and their personalities sometimes just rub you the wrong way. (Of course, you almost certainly do the same to them!) Jamie Dunlop’s book is a lifeline for those days when you question whether you’re in the right place on Sunday morning. As I read, I was both encouraged and convicted that loving the people in my local church just might be the most radical testimony of Christ that I could make in this world. Whether you are a church member or a church leader, Dunlop’s robust theology, practical application, and warm tone will help you push beyond personal comfort toward displaying the glorious name of Jesus. I highly commend it.”

Megan Hill, pastor’s wife; author, *A Place to Belong*; Managing Editor,
The Gospel Coalition

“The world is infatuated with the idea of love but hates its biblical implications. We love for selfish reasons, and want to love when it’s convenient. Loving unlovable people is countercultural and, in the world’s eyes, scandalous. That’s what makes the church unique, because people who have no business getting along selflessly seek each other’s good. In *Love the Ones Who Drive You Crazy*, Jamie Dunlop calls us to obey the commands of Scripture and follow our Lord’s example to selflessly and sacrificially love one another and pursue unity in diversity.”

Chopo Mwanza, Pastor, Faith Baptist Church Riverside, Kitwe, Zambia

“*Love the Ones Who Drive You Crazy* is a must-read for every Christian. Our world is full of conflict with people dividing over everything—race, healthcare, the environment, even the food we eat. But Christians are different. Our unity is in Christ alone. This unity isn’t easy but displays Christ to the world and can prevail over anything that threatens to divide us. Read this book to stoke your affections for your church and grow in loving others from the heart.”

Keri Folmar, pastor’s wife in Dubai; author

“True Christians need to be more concerned for the unity of the church. In a time when Christians are often too quick to leave churches because they disagree with or dislike other members, this book is a helpful and much-needed challenge. Read this book and be helped in your ability to love those difficult people today, with whom you will one day be united in Christ for all eternity, thus bearing a beautiful testimony to the power of the gospel.”

Matthias Lohmann, Pastor, FEG Munich, Germany; Chairman, Evangelium21

“Rather than detract from the church’s mission, disagreements in the church are an opportunity to display the gospel’s glorious power to unite us in Christ. Jamie Dunlop encourages us to behold the beauty of a *Christ alone* church built on mercy, hope, forgiveness, love, and faith. This helpful book challenged me to apply the truths of the gospel to my relationships in the church. Read it to be similarly convicted and encouraged. Better still, buy extra copies for your fellow church members for when you drive them crazy!”

Eugene Low, Lead Teaching Pastor, Grace Baptist Church, Singapore

“*Love the Ones Who Drive You Crazy* isn’t written by an abstract theorist tucked away in an ivory tower. Rather, it’s written by a pastor in one of the most politically, ethnically, and culturally diverse cities in the world, which means it’s written by a pastor who regularly sees redeemed sinners come into conflict. And yet, as Dunlop reminds us from Scripture, God can redeem even these conflicts for his great glory. If that seems downright impossible to believe, welcome to the club. And yet in this club, Dunlop’s voice insistently reminds us that with God all things are possible. We should borrow his hope. We should read this book. After all, if everyone were like you at church, church might be easy, but it wouldn’t be glorious. Here is a work that exhorts us toward the glorious while shepherding us through the pains of the inglorious. Let us gratefully receive and read it!”

Isaac Adams, Pastor, Iron City Church, Birmingham, Alabama; Founder, United? We Pray

Love the Ones Who Drive You Crazy

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Love the Ones Who Drive You Crazy

Eight Truths for Pursuing Unity in Your Church

Jamie Dunlop

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Series Preface

THE 9MARKS SERIES of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's Word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him.

So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's Word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

SERIES PREFACE

It is our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

So *This* Is What “Christ Alone” Means?

Conflict in Your Church as Evidence of Faith

If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

LUKE 6:32

The Difficulty of a “Christ Alone” Church

Who isn't discouraged by conflict at church? After all, the local church should be as close as we get to heaven on earth, right? Yet there are so many opportunities for disagreement at church. Conflict comes from differences of opinion, like whether church leaders were right to reduce support for the crisis pregnancy center you love. It comes from differences of conviction, like that church member whose social media feed promotes positions you

find morally troubling. Sometimes it's differences of culture or class that make you feel like an outsider in your own church. And sometimes it's no deeper than people who rub you the wrong way.

In fact, I'm convinced that churches are *especially* ripe for conflict, precisely because they should be centered on Christ alone. Think about that for a moment: a church should be defined by Christ alone. Not by Christ *and* shared convictions about children's schooling options, or by Christ *and* an antipoverty strategy, or by Christ *and* shared revulsion at so-and-so's social media post, or by Christ *and* a particular musical vibe. . . . You get the picture. It's easy to *say* the church should be centered on Christ alone. Well, dear reader, living with all these differences and disagreements is what it looks like. And too often we're entirely unprepared for this "Christ alone" kind of a church.

The Glory of a "Christ Alone" Church

Yet the differences and disagreements that threaten to tear your church apart are filled with potential to proclaim the glory of our good and gracious God. That's the burden of this book. After all, the churches of the New Testament were filled with differences and disagreements, just like yours and mine. They emerged from their own culture wars (Jew and Gentile). They came from opposite ends of society (slave and free, rich and poor). They arrived at opposing moral convictions (drinking wine, eating meat). In the New Testament, these disagreements weren't all resolved, and these differences weren't all repudiated. Yet through them and in part *because* of them, God answered Jesus's prayer for unity in John 17 in a powerful way: "That they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as

you loved me” (John 17:23). For these first Christians, love amidst differences and disagreements revealed the power of being united in Christ alone. And the same is true for you and your church.

This book was written to help you love the people in your church whom you struggle to love because of your differences with them. Sometimes differences at church will be about big issues where the gospel’s at stake—like whether a Christian can legitimately pursue a gay lifestyle or whether Christ is the only way to God. In those cases, you should fight for biblical truth even at the cost of unity. Other times, differences won’t immediately threaten the gospel, but they’ll be significant enough that you and these other Christians need to part ways and go to different churches, trusting God’s purposes for that separation just like Paul and Barnabas did at the end of Acts 15. Historic differences over baptism come to mind. Sometimes differences with other members or church leaders will have so damaged your trust in them that you need to leave your church.

This book isn’t about any of these church-separating situations, though they are difficult. Instead, this book is for the many situations when you decide that you can stay in your church *despite* all the differences. This book is about building beautiful, Christ-exalting unity when you choose to stay and when you choose to love even the ones who drive you crazy. Keep in mind, of course, that the people in your church who drive you crazy might have similar questions about how to love you!

I’m writing in the years following a time of great turmoil in countless churches—including mine—over issues like race and politics and pandemic precautions. I hear from many Christians that they’re looking forward to getting back to

times when church can be less complicated. But I'm writing this book because, for a variety of factors (which I'll get to), I doubt we're going back to those days when church felt like a lazy stroll on a summer evening (at least, comparatively speaking). And if we care about the glory of Jesus, that could be a very good thing.

Waves of Conflict

To provide an example of what I mean, let me tell you about the past couple of years at my church in Washington, DC, located a few blocks from the United States Capitol. Tension seemed to come in waves, with each new wave crashing down before the previous one had yet receded. Perhaps you can relate.

Wave 1: In response to a pandemic-related government order, my church stopped meeting in the spring of 2020. Then we began meeting again, outdoors, in a neighboring jurisdiction, since large religious gatherings were outlawed in our city. Neither of these decisions escaped controversy within my church.

Wave 2: In June, our city erupted in protest after the killings of several unarmed Black men and women by police. And my church erupted too. Some members marched in protests. Others were appalled at some of what those protests stood for. On both sides, many felt our church leaders spoke too timidly.

Wave 3: In September, my church voted to bring a lawsuit against our city because of its prohibition against our church meeting outdoors (wave 1 again). Some church members couldn't believe we would work through the courts rather than simply disobey the law. Others felt a lawsuit was way out of line. Meanwhile, wave 2 continued.

Wave 4: In November, our nation held a presidential election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Given our location, we're accustomed to this once-every-four-years test of our unity in Christ. People still talk about the day when the Senate majority leader threatened on the morning talk shows to strip a recalcitrant senator of his committee posts—yet both men showed up at our church together—with the sound system run that morning by the assistant to the vice president (from the opposing political party). We have a long history of putting aside political differences under Christ. But this one was different. Convictions were heightened along multiple dimensions. And tension didn't ease with Election Day as many (including some in my church) disputed the official result while others (including some in my church) were aghast at what they saw as societal sabotage. Even praying publicly for the president-elect became a political statement.

The waves continued. In April of 2021, as a result of our lawsuit, we negotiated a return to our church building. Many in the congregation were dismayed that this hadn't happened months earlier, and their pain was on full display. Others were appalled at how callous some in their own church seemed to a pandemic that by then had killed so many, including some they loved.

As one of their pastors, I watched over this restive flock through these seasons of pain. Yet as I had conversation after conversation with unhappy members of my church, I began to see these conflicts less as evidence of failure and more as evidence of faith.

Failure or Faith?

How could all this disagreement be anything other than failure? Isn't church supposed to provide safe harbor from storms of

controversy in the world outside? To be sure, my church failed—in many ways—in how we disagreed. Yet at the same time I can describe this turmoil as evidence of faith because nearly all these people continued loving one another despite these differences. What's more, many friendships between would-be enemies became that much richer.

Very often, the existence of disagreement in a church is not a sign that things have gone tragically *wrong*, but that things have gone gloriously *right*. I realize this may sound naïve, but give me a few paragraphs to explain myself. As I noted earlier, a church should be centered on Christ alone. Not on Christ *and* shared opinions about navigating a pandemic *and* the best way to confront racism *and* common political convictions. Some disagreements that rock our world have no place in the church, because Scripture comes down clearly on one side. Yet for the many differences on which Christians can legitimately disagree, controversy in society will often bleed into the church—*if*, that is, we're united around Christ alone. If everyone agreed on all these matters, church would be a lot easier. But easy love rarely shows off gospel power.

This matters because Scripture teaches that unity in Christ despite our differences is a primary way God intends to show off his goodness and glory. Take Romans 15 as an example. After a lengthy section on how Jew and Gentile can live together in the local church despite all their differences, Paul gives this word of blessing:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father

of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Rom. 15:5–7)

Twice in this short passage, we see God getting glory through the harmony that comes as Christians live *in accord with Christ*. Not that this is easy; note that Paul prays to “the God of endurance and encouragement.” Yet if this difficulty had led the first Roman churches to abandon unity, or to insist on uniformity rather than Jew-Gentile diversity, Paul’s prayer would have fallen flat. The differences that threaten to tear your church apart are *opportunities* to demonstrate that being “in accord with Christ Jesus” is all we need to be in “harmony with one another.” That’s how “with one voice” we “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” If your church is about Jesus *and* immigration reform, you rob him of glory. If your church is about Jesus *and* homeschooling, you rob him of glory. Just as God gets greater glory through redemption than through creation alone, the glory he receives in your church’s unity is greater in disagreement and difference than if everyone were in the same place to begin with.

Yet This Is Hard

But living this out is not for the faint of heart. If your church is built on Christ alone, then:

- People in your church won’t “get it” on issues that are important to you. “She thinks that if I took the Bible seriously, I’d never own a gun. Can you believe that?”
- Church leaders won’t “get it” on issues that are important to you. Your pastors should be careful how they speak on

important issues about which Christians in your church can legitimately disagree—no matter their own opinions. That can make you feel like your church is failing to speak prophetically. “This is the greatest moment of racial reckoning in a generation, and my pastor’s just talking about the same old stuff!”

- People in your church won’t understand you. You’ll find yourself at church with people who lack the similarity in background, opinion, and culture that would allow them to understand you without having to ask. “If one more person asks what it’s like having hair like mine, I swear I’m out of here.”
- Your church won’t be insulated from society’s controversies. “I thought that of all places, church would have been the one place where no one would bring up the election.”

Too many of us have never really grappled with the implications of a church centered on Christ alone. We applaud diversity in our churches and pray for more diversity, never contemplating the cost and challenge that comes when God answers our prayer.¹

Consumerism at Church Makes This Harder

What’s more, the way many of us have been taught to think about church complicates matters further. Consider for a moment the questions people ask when they’re looking for a new church. “Do

1 In general, when I speak of “diversity” in this book, I am referring to much more than ethnic or racial diversity. Rather, I’m referring to all the various kinds of differences that exist in a church, which I summarized in the first section of this introduction—including ethnic and racial diversity.

I like their style of music?” “Would I fit into their small groups?” “Will my kids enjoy their children’s ministry?” “Do they have a service team for me?” We shop for a church like we shop for a car. “Does it fit my needs? Is it going to give me any trouble? Will it make me look good?” Put simply, we approach church as consumers.

But here’s the catch: if you view church as a consumer, what will you do with the very *unconsumer*-like traits of churches that are full of people who think differently than you, who don’t understand you, and who make you uncomfortable? If you pick a church like you pick a car, what happens when the real cost of Christ-alone diversity becomes apparent? Sometimes, churches are a step ahead of us, designing small groups, church services, or even entire congregations to fit one specific type of person so that these questions rarely confront their members. But that’s uniformity, not unity.

Add to that a very modern tendency to want to solve problems rather than live with them (assuming we view these uncomfortable disagreements as “problems”) and a general bent toward comfort, and we have a recipe for some serious dissatisfaction with church. At least, that is, with a church centered on Christ alone.

And It’s Getting Harder

That’s not all. In today’s world, several trends are making these challenges progressively more difficult.

Take social media, for example. Despite its potential for good, social media is a real challenge to unity in a diverse church because it advertises our opinions. Think about church in the early 2000s. If you had a particularly edgy opinion about race relations or

alternative medicine or gentrification, it came up at church when you wanted it to come up. Today, what would once have surfaced only in private conversation is often posted for public consumption. Which pastor *hasn't* fielded calls from church members who are outraged that a church member could post this or “like” that? What's more, the economics of social media tend toward the edgy, controversial, and sharply-stated. And social media doesn't simply advertise our opinions; it often shapes them. It can even result in different church members coming to different convictions because they're looking at different sets of facts.

Another factor: in the United States, evangelical churches over the past several decades have been increasing in their ethnic and racial diversity.² For example, over the past twenty years, the portion of American evangelicals in multiracial churches has doubled³ while the portion in completely White or completely Black churches fell by more than half.⁴ As of 2019, the average congregation is more than twice as diverse along ethnic and racial lines as it was twenty years earlier.⁵ This data comes with a host of caveats, especially for those who would take increasing

- 2 From Duke University's National Congregations Study, conducted every five to eight years. The results cited in this paragraph were published in Kevin D. Dougherty, Mark Chaves, and Michael O. Emerson, “Racial Diversity in U.S. Congregations, 1998–2019,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 4 (2020): 551–62.
- 3 The study defines “multiracial churches” as congregations where no racial group constitutes more than 80 percent of the congregation's participants. In 2018–2019, such congregations accounted for 24 percent of the total, up from 13 percent in 1998.
- 4 The study reported that it did not have sufficient numbers of completely Asian or completely Hispanic congregations in its dataset to evaluate similar trends for these types of congregations.
- 5 Note that all three of the trends cited have been observed in every period of study, including the most recent (2012–2019).

diversity as assurance that ethnic and racial tension is behind us.⁶ Yet one reality is clear: American evangelicals (particularly if they are White) are far more likely to rub shoulders at church with those of a different ethnicity or race than they were several decades ago. With that comes an increased likelihood that they’ll find differences with others at church regarding the many factors and issues that tend to cluster by race and ethnicity. This answer to many prayers comes with many challenges.

Beyond these two trends, it seems that as society becomes more secular, disagreements at church are increasingly matters of conviction and conscience, not just preference. Gone are the “worship wars” of the 1990s. Now we disagree over what a Christian working for a secular company should say during his office’s “pride month” celebration, or whether a Christian can recommend a book by a critical theory scholar. We even disagree over whether Christians can legitimately disagree on issues like these. The question is no longer “Do I *want* to go to a church that has a praise band?” but “Will my conscience *allow* me to go to church with people who add gendered pronouns to their email signatures?” Which concessions are legitimate adaptations to a changing culture and which form an uncrossable line? As a prominent sociologist at the University of Illinois wrote in 2021, “I’ve been studying religion and religious congregations for 30 years. This is a level of conflict that I’ve never seen.”⁷ With morality receding in the wider culture like an ebbing tide, Christians

6 For example, while diversity has increased as racial minorities have joined majority-White churches, there is almost no sign that the reverse is taking place, and even as majority-White churches become more racially and ethnically diverse, they normally retain a White majority and White leadership.

7 Francis Wilkinson, “America’s Churches Are Now Polarized, Too,” *Bloomberg Quint*, February 21, 2021.

disagree over which moorings to cling to. Perhaps this trend is the cost of staying faithful to Scripture in an increasingly secular world.

A fourth trend, prevalent at least in the United States, is a decreasing tolerance in societal discourse for any deviation from established political orthodoxy. No one would suggest that politics has ever been peaceful. And the present day is not the worst political polarization we've ever seen (let's not forget the American Civil War). But many social commentators have noted that polarization is markedly more strident than in recent generations, whether we're talking about "cancel culture" on the left or the right's concern with identifying "true" conservatives. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has located 2009 as a turning point in this regard. Since then, he says, it has become "more hazardous to be seen fraternizing with the enemy or even failing to attack the enemy with sufficient vigor."⁸ For a broad subset of the population, a challenge to any individual political position has become a challenge to one's entire worldview—even at church. As such, positions on issues like gun control or reparations for slavery that a few years ago would have been understood as legitimate disagreements among Christians are now seen to be beyond the pale of Christian fellowship. As evangelical scholar Os Guinness has written, "There is only one short and easy step from 'This is the Christian way' to 'There is only one Christian way' to 'Anything different from this way is not Christian' to 'All those who differ from my way are not Christians.'"⁹ Social polarization has most certainly found its way into Christ's church.

8 Jonathan Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," *The Atlantic*, April 2022.

9 Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do about It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 144–45.

All this makes church hard, and increasingly so. It’s hard because we’ve been sold a consumerist vision of church when, in reality, church is quite sacrificial. It’s hard because our differences are increasingly on display, and they’re increasingly convictional. It’s hard because some people in our churches stretch our love to the breaking point. When we speak of church as “family,” we have in mind quiet board games by the fireplace. But sometimes church “family” is more akin to shouting matches over who used up all the hot water.

Fight or Flight

What happens in our churches as a result? Too frequently, we resort to our natural instincts: fight or flight. We fight, standing up to the wimpy pastor who’s selling out to the agenda of the [insert odious cause here]. Sometimes that instinct is a good one, when the gospel really is at stake. But sometimes all we accomplish are the “dissensions” and “divisions” Paul condemns as “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19–21. Pastor Kevin DeYoung states this danger well: “It may be that your pastor is cowardly trying to make everyone happy. That won’t work. But it may be that he is trying to wisely shepherd a diverse flock in a way that helps the sheep to focus on Christ and him crucified.”¹⁰

On the other hand, sometimes we give up on the idea of a church centered on Christ alone and flee to another church where we won’t find as much difference, or to no church at all.¹¹

10 Kevin DeYoung, “What Are We Arguing About?,” *DeYoung, Restless, and Reformed* (blog), *The Gospel Coalition*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

11 According to Harvard University’s annual Cooperative Election Study, 2016–2020 marked the first period since the study began when the *majority* of self-labeled evan-

Sometimes the instinct to flee is also good, when we need to leave if we're to continue growing in Christ. But too often we're merely exchanging the glory of diversity for the comfort of similarity.

Either way, whether we're wrong in our fight or wrong in our flight, people are hurt, pastors quit, Christians give up on church, gospel power remains unproven, and Christ is dishonored.

The Way Forward

So what should we do? How can we keep loving “those” people in our churches who drive us crazy? Should we avoid them? Confront them? Fight? Flee?

In short, we must *love* them. And to see how, let's begin with some famous words of Jesus: “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. . . . But love your enemies . . . and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:32–36).¹² While “those” people in your church are not your enemies—praise God you are one in Christ—they certainly fall toward the “more difficult” end of the spectrum that Jesus lays out. Love them, Jesus says, because God will reward you when you do. And love them so that your mercy will reflect and display God's own enemy-loving mercy, just as a son reflects his father.

gical Christians in the United States did not normally attend a church service on a weekly basis, a trend that was in place long before the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹² Jesus isn't merely telling us to love one group of people, our enemies. He's defining a whole ethic of love by staking out its extreme (love even our enemies) to show that easy love is not the love that testifies to God's power. For more on this idea that Jesus is using the command to love your enemies to define an ethic of love, read the opening chapters of D. A. Carson's *Love in Hard Places* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002).

According to Jesus, it's *this* end of the spectrum—love that's difficult—that matters the most. Just as a tiny set of dumbbells hardly shows off the strength of the bodybuilder, love in your church that's natural and effortless hardly shows off the glory of the gospel that God has worked into your heart. Love that's difficult is the antidote to hypocrisy in the church; it reveals who's really following Jesus and who's just along for the ride (1 John 3:16–18).

Of course, as much as unity amidst difference may be costly to us, it was infinitely more costly to Christ. Consider that the one speaking these words in Luke 6 knew that the mercy he proclaimed would cost him his life. You and I were “evil and ungrateful.” Yet he delighted to show us the riches of his mercy. Is that not the Savior we want to proclaim? It is only because his body hung on a cross that we can be members of his body. And his sacrifice was costly enough to pay the price of your church's unity, no matter your differences. As such, I'm convinced that somewhere in this brazen command of Jesus is the elixir of life for your church and for mine.

But how exactly can we love this way?

The Rest of This Book

Let me offer a roadmap for where we're going. Most of this book examines some passages near the end of Paul's letter to the Romans, where Paul explains and expands on Jesus's “love your enemies” ethic of Luke 6.¹³ In Romans 12, 14, and 15, Paul addresses a group of churches in Rome who, while united in Christ,

13 While the breadth of these chapters in Romans certainly goes beyond the commands of Luke 6, scholars have noted many thematic links between these two sections of Scripture. Especially given that Luke was Paul's traveling companion, it makes one

were riven with cultural and convictional differences.¹⁴ The result is a gospel-infused blueprint for building genuine, affectionate, and God-glorifying friendships with the people at church who drive you crazy.

Yet Paul doesn't merely give us a list of "how-to" commands. Rather, he reaches behind the commands to describe a set of perspectives that shine a different light on relationships at church. We're accustomed to having our perspectives adjusted by the experiences of those we love. For example, you'll have more sympathy and grace for those struggling with mental illness once your best friend finds herself there. These perspectives Paul gives us do much the same, but at a deeper, more theological level. As such, each chapter in this book examines a different truth that offers a new perspective on those at church you struggle to love. My prayer is that with each new angle, the grip of self-righteousness and complacency on your heart will progressively loosen, investing your love with renewed power, persistence, and joy. In Ephesians 4:3, Paul tells us to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." You might think of these chapters as a guide to maintaining God-given unity in your church, and how to do so eagerly.

wonder how much common source material or connection there may have been in the writing of these two books of the Bible, with Romans most likely written first.

¹⁴ Why will we skip Romans 13? Because chapter 13 is really a parenthesis, an excursus in the middle of Paul's teaching on love. As Paul delves into the topic of love, he encourages us at the end of chapter 12 to "never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God" (12:19). That raises the question whether we should ever pursue earthly justice. Romans 13 is Paul's answer: earthly government has been instituted by God to pursue earthly justice. Then, in the closing verses of chapter 13, Paul transitions back to his main theme of love in the church, which he continues through chapter 14 and the beginning of chapter 15.

A Critical Assumption

Of course, that phrase “the unity of *the Spirit*” is an important one. If your congregation has many people in it who aren’t indwelt by the Spirit of God because they haven’t been born again, this book will likely be more frustrating than helpful. This is a book about pursuing unity in Christ, but it assumes that the ones who drive you crazy in your church are in fact *in Christ*; that is, people who have turned away from their sin in order to follow Christ, trusting in him alone for salvation, and have received God’s supernatural gift of regeneration, of being born again (John 3:3–5).

This isn’t the same as saying that everyone present at your Sunday service is a Christian; I would hope that there are dozens or even hundreds of self-conscious unbelievers attending your church because they want to give the gospel a hearing. But I *am* assuming that the members of your church can give a credible profession of faith so that, while only God can know who is truly born again, there is good reason to believe that they are at least largely regenerate.¹⁵ If your church is *not* united in Christ, then this book is premature. I pray that you will see this change over time as the true gospel is preached and believed. But seeking to implement the principles of this book in a church full of non-Christians will merely result in frustration and confusion.

15 For some churches, what I am describing is what our theological forebearers termed “regenerate church membership.” For churches that practice infant baptism, what I have in mind is a regenerate communing membership. In this paragraph I use the term “largely regenerate” because in no church can we ever be fully confident that every member (or communing member) is a Christian. Jesus warned us of our human tendency toward self-deception (Matt. 7:22–23); that is why Jesus gave us the tool of church discipline (Matt. 18:15–20). For more on this matter, see chapters 1–2 in *The Compelling Community* by Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

Why All These Differences?

On the other hand, love for one another in a church that *is* composed of Christians—despite their differences—is a beautiful testimony to the power of the gospel. This is where the rest of this book will focus. Yet first we must undertake some important groundwork. Very often, we're inclined to think that all the debate and disagreement in a church is a giant distraction from its mission. "If we could all just get along, then we could get back to what our church is supposed to be doing." Yet as we see in Luke 6, and later in Romans, all this disagreement and debate isn't distraction at all. It's center stage for the *ultimate* mission of your church: to show off the goodness and glory of God Most High.

But this message will ring hollow if, like many evangelicals, we've reduced the purpose of the church to the things it does, like community and missions and evangelism. If church matters merely for what it *does*, then we'll find little patience for all the differences and disagreements I've described. On the other hand, once we discover God's true calling for a church, to be a display of his glory (which encompasses the things it does and much more), then the motivations Scripture gives us suddenly come alive. It's to that topic—the purpose of your church—that we now turn.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What kinds of people in your church do you struggle to love (e.g., people who don't understand your cultural background, people who think differently on politics, people whose personalities clash with yours, etc.)?

2. In what ways have you seen differences between congregants in your church become more pronounced in recent years?
3. Reread Romans 15:5–7. In your church, what kinds of harmony glorify God?

Prayer Points

- Pray that your desire to love those in your church whom you find to be difficult would grow.
- Pray that your fellow church members would cherish God-honoring unity in your church.
- Pray for the leaders of your church to accurately discern which divisions in your congregation threaten gospel unity.

Why Did God Put Difficult People in My Church?

Truth 1: Insistence on Unity
Displays the Glory of God

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

ROMANS 15:5–6

When Unity Costs Too Much

Trinity Church was in trouble. And its trouble sprang from what had only recently seemed to be its great strength. Like many urban congregations, the church had steadily declined for years until only the old stalwarts remained. Then young people started

moving into the neighborhood, many attending Trinity. The newly multigenerational congregation delighted in its diversity.

That is, until now. As the young newcomers shifted from a welcomed minority to a new majority, Trinity was waking up to a wild new level of disagreement in its pews. The old guard who had prided themselves on folding younger members into leadership were becoming resentful of the direction those new leaders were taking them. Younger members felt that their seniors were slow to adapt to a changing neighborhood. Budget meetings were exceedingly difficult, with newer members wanting more family ministry and older members wanting to recapture the church's historical commitment to international work. The pastor was regularly scolded by older and younger members alike for sermon application that seemed too targeted toward the needs of the other group. Picking songs was a tightrope act.

As much as everyone hated to admit it, Trinity was divided. What's more, division was stifling mission. The team who'd faithfully volunteered for years at the local homeless shelter disbanded, complaining of a "takeover" by younger volunteers who wanted more focus on addiction recovery. A group of younger church members informed the elders they would no longer contribute to the missions fund until longstanding missionaries were reevaluated. Giving to the general fund was down by almost a third, a reflection of frustration by older and younger members alike.

"This is ridiculous," the pastor exclaimed in frustration. "How have we gone from happily serving together one year to an embarrassing catfight the next? After all, why are we here? Missions? Well, clearly that's suffering. Evangelism? Who wants to come to a church like this? Spiritual growth? All this division is just slowing

us down.” In desperation, he floated a solution to the leadership team. “Look,” he said, “we’ve been saving up to build a bigger sanctuary. What if, instead, we use that money to buy another building and just divide into two churches? After all, that’s what we’ve really become. Then we can spend our time serving Jesus instead of fighting.”

What’s the Purpose of a Church?

What do you think? Is the pastor’s solution a wise recognition of reality? Or an unfortunate retreat? That depends largely on how you answer his question, “Why are we here?” My guess is that if you were to ask the average member of Trinity what the purpose of their church is, you’d get one of two answers (or both). One answer has to do with what Trinity Church can do for *God*. Things like international missions, church planting, mercy ministry, and so forth. The other answer has to do with what the church does for *them*. Things like building community, helping them grow in faith, teaching their kids about Jesus, and providing opportunities to serve. But like Trinity was discovering, an insistence on unity given all their differences was confounding both aims. On the surface, it would appear this pastor is on to something. Like Paul and Barnabas, perhaps they should go their separate ways so they can stop fighting, work hard for Jesus, and figure the rest out in heaven.

Churches *Designed* to Explode?

Yet I would maintain that this mindset runs counter to the New Testament’s priorities for church. Here’s what I mean. Imagine that you were a first-century Christian in Rome. Knowing that

Jew and Gentile mix together as well as oil and water, you'd have one church for Jews and another for Gentiles. One strategy for reaching Jews and another for Gentiles. At least, that's what makes sense to me. But as Scripture makes quite clear, God's plan for these churches was to be Jew-Gentile from the very beginning, with all the miscommunication, mistrust, and misunderstanding that no doubt ensued. It was an explosive combination.

In fact, the churches of the New Testament were often built of combustible materials. The first church, we discover in Acts 6, was both Hebrew *and* Hellenist, Jews from different cultures famous for their mutual animosity.¹ The church in Colossae was both slave *and* free. The church in Corinth had people who ate meat sacrificed to idols *and* those who thought that was sin. The churches James wrote to were rich *and* poor. Differences of culture, differences of conscience, differences of class. Some explosive material!

I'll bet your church is a bit of a tinderbox too. Your divisions may not be generational like Trinity's, but surely there are fault lines that run through your congregation. Just think of all the possible disagreements: how to apply biblical teaching on gender, what music to sing, how to run the children's ministry, how to navigate a world enamored with the LGBTQ agenda. Not to mention more theological disagreements. Not to mention ordinary, run-of-the-mill church disagreements like what to prioritize in the budget and what color to put on the walls. And those are just in the category of disagreements. What about differences of culture, personality, social strata, and—I'm sure—three or four categories

1 K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 149.

that immediately jump to your mind I haven't thought to mention? Like the churches of the New Testament, your insistence on unity amidst difference means that the explosives are set, the switch is set to "hair trigger," and the fireworks are ready to go. So why not simply become two (or more) happier, more productive, more homogeneous churches?

Challenging the Utilitarian View of Church

To answer that, let's revisit the question Trinity's pastor was asking: "Why are we here?" Or, stated more precisely, "What's the purpose of a local church?" I suggested two answers: doing things for God, or doing things for us. While both answers are true, they're incomplete. Why? In part, because neither can explain the New Testament's clear enthusiasm for churches that find unity amidst great difference. If we want to have patience and enthusiasm to love those in our churches who drive us crazy, we must find in the Scriptures a deeper purpose statement for church.

To begin, note that the two answers I gave to the question "Why are we here" are rather utilitarian in nature. They're focused on what a church produces. They value church based on what it produces for *us* (community, teaching, etc.) or for *God* and for *others* (international missions, mercy ministry, etc.). However, as I'll explain in a few paragraphs, God's purpose for a church isn't found merely in its *utility* but in its *beauty*. Not simply in *production* but in *reflection*; that is, in reflecting who God is as a display of his glory. If we can recover the biblical priority of the local church as a reflection of God's glory—and beyond that, the pleasure and power of reflecting his glory—we will recover new appreciation, patience, perspective, and even enthusiasm for love

that's hard. To show you this from Scripture, let me take you on a brief tour of the idea of "beautiful reflection," from Eden to Israel, from Jesus to the church.

Beautiful Reflection: The Story Begins

This story begins in Genesis 1, when "God created man in his own image, / in the image of God he created him; / male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). The purpose of human beings is rooted in our unique status as those made in his image. Our nature is our job description: to reflect the glory of who God is, just as your image in the mirror reflects who you are. Then, having created mankind, God "blessed" them (Gen. 1:28). When God "blesses" in Genesis, be it the animals (1:22), the Sabbath (2:3), or Noah (9:1), he's explaining how his purposes for each aspect of creation will be accomplished.² Here's our blessing: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Putting these pieces together: we will reflect who God is (Gen. 1:27) as we rule God's creation as his representatives and as we fill the earth with a society of those made in his image (Gen. 1:28).

Do you see the relationship between doing things for God and reflecting who God is? We're made according to his image, and our life's purpose is to advertise how good and amazing he

2 Regarding God's blessing on Abraham, Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum note: "Blessings are the manifestation of a faithfulness, fidelity, and solidarity in relationships whereby one's natural and personal capacity to fulfill God's intention and purpose is advanced and furthered" *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 278.

is (Gen. 1:27). We *live that out* through our labor and our love, through our rule and our relationships, as described in Genesis 1:28. As such, you are less like a machine, designed to do things for God, and more like a beautiful painting, created to display his glory.

After all, God didn't create us because he needed us to do things for him. He was ruling the earth just fine before we came along. In his creative genius, he was filling the earth just fine. Instead, his primary purpose for you and for me is to display the glory of who he is. Production serves reflection.

When we look for meaning in the things we do (production) absent what those actions say about God (reflection), we get into trouble. Consider, for instance, how the idols of our world correspond so well with God's commands in Genesis 1:28. The idolatry of power (be it your work or your money) finds meaning for life in God's command to exercise dominion. The idolatry of love finds meaning in relationships, something quite integral to God's command to be fruitful and to fill the earth. It's no wonder then, that in Genesis 3 God curses these very things—exercising dominion (3:17), relationships, and fruitfulness (3:16)—so that we will never succeed in our quest to find purpose in what we do, divorced from our deeper purpose of reflecting the glory of our Creator.

The Story Continues: Israel to the New Creation

Fast-forward past the creation account. Through the patriarchs, God creates an entire nation and, once again, his purpose for them is reflective in nature. We can sum up the laws and regulations that fill the early books of the Bible in a phrase: "Be holy, for I am

holy” (Lev. 11:44). What’s more, reflection was to be evangelistic, pointing “the peoples” to the glory of Israel’s God (Deut. 4:6–7).

But that’s not what Old Testament Israel did. They worshiped idols instead. More specifically: Ashtoreth, the goddess of fertility (idolizing fruitfulness), and Baal, the god of storm and rain, and therefore of good harvests, who ruled the divine pantheon (idolizing work and rule).³ Like us, they idolized Genesis 1:28 (rule and fill), divorced from Genesis 1:27 (made in God’s image). Rather than leading lives of worship as those made in God’s image, Israel worshiped images of what God had cursed.

In fact, that use of the word *image* brings up an important point. For the first nine chapters of Genesis, *image* is a positive concept. “God created man in his own image.” But from Genesis 10 through Malachi, the word takes on a universally negative connotation, describing the graven images people worship instead of God. It’s astonishing, really, that such a foundational term in the Old Testament’s opening chapters is never again used in a positive sense. It’s as if the Old Testament were begging for the New.

Sure enough, as we enter the New Testament, *image* is once again a positive term. But who does it refer to now? “Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). One significant way in which Christ succeeded where Adam failed is that he, finally, is the perfect image of God.⁴ As Jesus says to Philip in John 14:9, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

3 Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmens, 2002), 68.

4 Note that Christ is more than just a perfect Adam. Whereas Adam and Eve were made “according to” God’s image, Christ *is* the image of God.

Yet this story of reflection does not end with Jesus. Jesus came to save a people for himself whom God “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29). As men and women who are being recreated in Christ, we reflect the glory of God not merely individually but corporately. Jesus said it’s our love “for one another” that marks us off as his disciples (John 13:35). Beyond that, love despite differences makes a particularly powerful statement about the worth of Christ. Thus Paul’s repeated image of the church as the body of Christ, representing him in a multiplicity of backgrounds (Eph. 4:16; 1 Cor. 12:13) and gifts (Rom. 12:5–6; 1 Cor. 12:27–28). Paul writes that unity between Jew and Gentile shows off his wisdom even to the heavenly beings (Eph. 3:8, 10). And he tells the Colossians to relate to each other in love because they “have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:10–11). Love amidst difference was a key aspect of how these Christians would represent the image of God.

When a church in all its differences unites around Jesus, it reflects the wisdom and power and glory of God far beyond what we can do as individuals. As a nineteenth-century pastor wrote, “The Church is the mirror, that reflects the whole effulgence of the Divine character. It is the grand scene, in which the perfections of Jehovah are displayed to the universe.”⁵

Where does this story end? With reflection and the reflected one joining together. In Revelation 21:10–11, we behold the

5 Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry, with an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 1.

bride of the Lamb, the church, who is “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God.” What does it mean that this city *has* the glory of God? Is this reflection, where the glory of the city displays the glory of God? Or is it the reflected one, God, who dwells there (Rev. 21:3)? Now that faith has become sight, it’s both. The kings of the earth bring the glory of the nations into the city (Rev. 21:24), and the glory of God himself is its light (Rev. 21:23). Throughout human history, God’s name has been tarnished, his goodness slandered, his justice mocked. As reflections of his glory, our lives as God’s people have argued the truth about him, albeit imperfectly, both as individuals and together. Now at last in Revelation 21, the beauty and glory of the one to whom our lives have pointed is unmistakable.

Let’s summarize. Your purpose as a created being, your purpose as a re-created being, and your church’s purpose as a community of re-created beings are all one and the same: to reflect the glory and goodness of your Creator. As I noted earlier, you are less of a machine, designed to do things for God, and more of a beautiful painting, created to reflect his glory. The good things that you and your church do are simply the pigments in that painting, the means toward a greater end of reflecting his goodness and glory. This truth has three implications for any church who, like Trinity, struggles with difference and disagreement.

Implication 1: The Priority of Beautiful Reflection

To whatever extent we’ve located the main purpose of a church in what it produces—either for us or for God—this story of reflection should clarify our thinking. It reminds us that doing good

things matters primarily because that's how we show off the glory of our good God. Again, production serves reflection.⁶

My own church struggled with this during the COVID-19 pandemic. With everything shut down, people were frustrated that isolation was impeding discipling, missions, and evangelism, and they were frustrated that so much attention was consumed by the many difficult conversations we were having as a church. I was frustrated too. But I had to remind myself that God's delight is not mainly in how much we produce for him, but in how well we reflect him. Sometimes merely *being* the church shouts great glory to God—because of what unity amidst disagreement and difference proclaims about his sufficiency—even when the things we hope to accomplish seem stalled.

Think of the people in your church you find difficult to love. It would be easy to ignore and avoid them, and even to rationalize doing so. “I don't want to stir up trouble and be a distraction.” But what changes your mindset entirely is the realization that your church's *primary* purpose is to reflect the glory of God through unity together. That realization turns people from being obstacles to being treasured.

For example, imagine Rachel, a Jewish Christian in first-century Ephesus who's just about had it with Sophia, her Gentile sister in Christ. Rachel sees Sophia as completely ignorant of ancient Jewish tradition, not having a clue how hard it is for Jews to

6 Consider Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2:9–10. We were saved through faith—not as a result of works (2:9). Why? “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (2:10). The main “work” in view in these verses is not ours but God's. He saved us so we could do good works to show off *his* workmanship, the new creation he has wrought in our hearts. Your good work matters because it shows off God's good work.

invite Gentiles to be full members of the family. “Waltzing into the church like she owns the place!” Not only that, but Sophia feels free to buy anything she finds at the meat market without a thought as to which idol it might have been sacrificed to.

But Rachel has been reading Paul’s letter. She knows her feelings of resentment are wrong. So, despite the struggle in her heart, she resists the temptation to avoid Sophia but instead insists on loving her. “God says we’re one household of faith, and I’m going to live that way if it kills me!” (see Eph. 2:19). Imagine that what begins awkwardly at first eventually becomes a true friendship. When Paul writes in Ephesians 3:10 that even the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms stare in wonder at the Ephesian church, it’s people like Rachel and Sophia he has in mind. This difficulty, this faith-filled struggle to love, isn’t a distraction from the “real” work of ministry; it’s the main event! Beyond that, it’s the road to joy, which brings us to a second implication of the Bible’s story of beautiful reflection.

Implication 2: The Pleasure of Beautiful Reflection

Not long before I wrote this book, a woman named Tabitha was baptized at my church. She had come to believe the Christian gospel by watching religious debates with her atheist father. The more she watched, the more she realized that she agreed with the Christians. Yet this realization filled her with dread. What a terribly inconvenient truth to believe, she thought. “Surely this will destroy my life.” But then she found a church. “When I came, it was like stepping into a dreamworld. It took me from begrudgingly acknowledging God to delighting in him.” In hindsight, she thinks she truly came to faith when she discovered this delight.

In similar fashion, if God is to be glorified in our churches, we must believe that the beautiful reflection of a church full of differences is not merely important, but delightful. Even if initially we perceive that delight only by faith.

Where does this pleasure come from? It comes as we see Jesus in our relationships with each other, like Tabitha did. You've probably experienced this. You look around at the different members of your church small group and think, "This is crazy! There's no way we'd be friends except for Jesus, and what a friendship we have!" That's the pleasure of beautiful reflection. The slow movement of obedience from the category of "ought to" to the category of "delight to" glorifies the God we serve as good and delightful in all that he does. That's one reason why the term I'm using in this chapter isn't *reflection* but *beautiful reflection*, because our goal in the church is to reflect a Savior who is beautiful, desirable, and satisfying.

The pleasure of reflection also comes as we participate in it ourselves. Let's say you have the chance to help reconcile two brothers in your church who have been at odds. Several months later, you catch sight of them out of the corner of your eye, clearly enjoying each other's company. What a thrill! What's more, your joy at assisting their reconciliation is a shadow of God's joy as the great peacemaker. It's like you're a little kid, jumping from one of your dad's footprints to the next at the beach, imitating God and discovering how delightful it must be for God to be God. That's what turns reflection into worship. As you imitate God in your love for your church, the pleasure you feel reveals new dimensions to how delightful God really is.

Marriage offers an excellent illustration of how all this should work. Is the purpose of marriage to raise children and provide

companionship? It is . . . yet to define its purpose merely in terms of what it produces misses the point. For my wife's fortieth birthday, I surprised her with tickets to see the musical *Hamilton* on Broadway. Unbeknownst to me, she'd been longing to go but felt she shouldn't ask because it seemed too extravagant. Her reaction, in the words of my daughter: "Mommy, you squealed!" It was the perfect gift, and it made my wife feel wonderfully known and cherished and loved.

Was this gift worth the cost? Of course! But why? Merely because it helps us to accomplish more with our marriage? Goodness, no! The value of the gift is how it helps us better reflect Christ's love for us, which Paul says in Ephesians 5 is the main point of our marriage. My wife gets to experience how safe and delightful it is to follow one who loves her, which gives us both a better understanding of the privilege we have in following Christ. I get to experience the joy of giving of myself for her good and happiness, which helps us both better understand the joy Jesus has in giving himself for us (Heb. 12:2). To reduce marriage to its outputs is crass and belittling. To value how it reflects the love of Christ without *delighting* in that reflection falls flat. In the same way, God is honored when our churches delight to reflect his perfections through our life together. And as we saw in Luke 6 a few pages back, it's love for those we wouldn't naturally love that makes for an especially delightful and powerful display—which leads to a third implication.

Implication 3: The Power of Beautiful Reflection

Think back to those New Testament churches that seemed destined to explode. Explode they did! But not in division. They

were explosive in the power of their gospel witness. The faith of the Romans was reported around the world (Rom. 1:8), and the Jew-Gentile church in Ephesus glorified God's wisdom even to those *outside* this world (Eph. 3:10).

Beautiful reflection is magnificent in its power. In the churches of the New Testament, Jesus's prayer in John 17:21 was coming true: "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Reflection ("that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you") feeds production ("that the world may believe"). There's no "either-or" trade-off between the beauty of a church reflecting Jesus on the one hand, and the good that's done as they proclaim Jesus on the other. How many first-century Christians began their road to belief through the powerful witness of unity between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles?

Put On Your Faith Glasses

With all this in mind, let's return to Trinity's dilemma. Are they right to split into two churches? That's hard to say. Whatever the right answer, it's clear that they're using the wrong standard to make their decision. They're evaluating ministry success based on what they can accomplish together rather than their ability to portray Christ, as a beautiful, multifaceted reflection of his glory. If the local church can be assessed in terms of its outputs (numbers, baptisms, new churches started, missionaries sent out, etc.), then we'll have little patience for all the disagreements that would distract us from "mission." That's why, if we would love well, we must recover the primary mission of the church as beautiful reflection.

After all, whose life will result in greater glory to God: the brilliant Christian author loved by millions? Or your own version of Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), who, in faith, must fight for friendship? In God's economy, how can we know? Yet if it's our *faith* that brings pleasure to God (Heb. 11:6), I suspect we may be surprised at how much of the glory we see in heaven comes from faith-filled strugglers like these two in Philippi. Which chapters in your church's life will result in greater glory to God: times of amazing productivity, or times that took extreme faith just to stay together, showing off Christ's power at work? Who are we to say? Yet there is such a strong impulse in all of us to discount the struggles as unfortunate distraction, when in fact they may be the times when the supremacy of Christ was most loudly proclaimed by your church.

It's like watching a 3-D movie. With your bare eyes, the picture's blurry. But pop those glasses on, and a whole new dimension appears. The beautiful reflection of a church is like 3-D glasses that reveal the dimension of a congregation's faith. Yes, on the surface all we see is dissension, disagreement, and turmoil. But pop those glasses on, and suddenly you can see faith, reflecting back the glory and worthiness and beauty of God. I find it interesting that when Paul begins his letter to the Romans—whose churches were full of potentially explosive differences—he marvels at their *faith* (Rom. 1:8). Paul had his faith glasses on! And so must we.

Recovering the church's purpose, pleasure, and power as a beautiful reflection of Jesus helps us see why we should persevere in love. But how can we do that? What gospel tools does Jesus give us? That's our topic for the remaining pages of this book, as

we take inventory of all that Christ has provided in the closing chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What goes wrong when Christians conceive of a church's purpose merely in terms of the ministry it produces?
2. In your own words, trace the story of beautiful reflection from Genesis to Israel to Jesus to the church.
3. Which of the three implications of this story of beautiful reflection (priority, pleasure, power) is most thought-provoking for you?

Prayer Points

- Pray that your ambitions for your church would increasingly reflect God's ambitions for your church.
- Pray that your congregation would be a beautiful reflection of God and his glory.
- Pray that your church leaders would be patient and hopeful during seasons when your church is less productive than they would like.