



From Surviving to Thriving – Part 4 As a Church

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—I invite you to open with us to Hebrews 10. Let me start by saying it’s really good to be back. I am so thankful for Mike filling in on short notice a couple weeks ago when I found out I had COVID. My symptoms were very minor, just a cold, congestion, headaches, that loss of taste and smell. I’m just grateful for Mike on so many different levels.

We’re actually going to tag team today because we want to talk together about the church and how being in the church is absolutely critical if any one of us wants to thrive in our lives. Let me say that one more time; it’s a bold statement. Our community together in the church—being together as the church—is absolutely critical for any one of us to thrive in our lives. Let me illustrate this a couple ways.

First, in light of my last couple weeks with COVID, I pray all the more now for those who have experienced far worse symptoms and who have seen, even over recent weeks, family members, friends or church members lose their lives to COVID. One of the things that was most jarring to me was the isolation. Being in a room alone, not able to be around others, having to stay distant from others, not able to hug my wife or play with my kids. It was a clear reminder to me that we were not made to thrive in isolation. We’ve been created by God to thrive in community with others. This is hard-wired into us.

We’ve been using this illustration of two lemon trees. Mike was preaching and using these lemon trees as an example, talking about those who have gotten on to us a bit for letting a lemon tree die. Last week, Mike made a promise to revive this lemon tree. I just want to be clear: that’s not a promise I would have made. So that means this lemon tree is going home with Mike at the end of this series. It’s going to be in your corner, bro, and I’m going to let you be faithful to that promise you made.

In my newfound expertise in lemon trees, I have discovered all kinds of interesting things. As a reminder, we are exposing one tree to sunlight and water—just simple things that God has designed for a tree like this to thrive. And we are depriving the other tree of those same simple things. You see the difference? This is what we’re talking about—thriving.

One of the things I found in my newfound expertise in lemon trees is that the buds that are on a lemon tree can actually help one another flourish. This happens naturally. I’m going to speed up the process a little bit with this little brush here. If you take one of these buds from right here and put it on

another bud over here—oh, no, that one just fell off. Anyway, if you let it happen naturally, they actually help each other.

Let's forget the tree. The point is, if the illustration had worked, it would be a really powerful picture of how, in the church, this is actually how God has designed each of us to thrive. The whole picture I want you to see is that God has designed my flourishing in faith to help you flourish in faith, and God has designed your flourishing in faith to help me flourish in faith. We're actually intended to help each other grow. According to the way God works in the church, this is what happens.

Mike: That's exactly what God has done in my life. I just want to say for the record, God has used the leaders and members of this church, not just to shape and strengthen my ministry, but really to shape me. Unlike our broken illustration with the lemon buds, the church has not been used to destroy me. It has been used to build me up and cause me to thrive in very specific ways, even as a pastor in our church.

I think about Dave Young, who really was so fundamental in shaping how I think about the Christian life—a life that is built around enjoying intimacy with God. I think about Lydia, one of the women in our church who has become like another aunt to my kids and who has been such a faithful friend to me and Ashley during some of the most dark and difficult seasons of our lives.

I was thinking this week, as we were preparing this, about when Ashley and I got married. I was trying to figure out what it meant to lead her spiritually. The look on her face made it abundantly clear that I was failing miserably. I remember meeting with one of the elders in our church and sharing my struggles with him. I didn't know what to do. I had no idea how to do it. I remember him sitting with me in the cafeteria right here at the Tysons location, just pouring into my life out of the decades of lessons he had learned in his own marriage. I'm so thankful personally for the way God has used this church to help me grow and thrive in my personal life.

David: I was thinking similarly about how, in my own life and during the last few weeks specifically, how the Lord has brought some people from the church I grew up in to my mind and heart in a fresh way. I'm just so thankful for people from all kinds of different perspectives who were investing their lives in mine. This is what the church is about. So this morning we want to show you some things in God's Word today from Hebrews 10.

There's a ton of things we could talk about here, but I want to read verses 19-25 and I want you to look for the repetition of two words. Three times you're going to see two words repeated. See if you notice them.

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil

conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.* ²⁴ *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,* ²⁵ *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

Did you see the two words that are repeated three times? At the very beginning of verse 22, “[L]et us...” At the beginning of verse 23, “Let us...” Verse 24, “And let us...” The author of Hebrews is saying, “In light of what Jesus has done in each of our lives individually, let us together, as the church, do these three things. When you think about it, these three things summarize how God has designed the church to help you and me thrive together.

As members of the body of Christ, brothers and sisters in the church help one another:

1. Flourish in the faith – Hebrews 10:22

The first principle is in verse 22: “[L]et us draw near [to God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith...” We help each other flourish in faith. We help each other draw near to God. What a statement! Do you want to draw near to God? Then you need other people in the church to help do that in your life. You need to be around other people who are drawing near to God, in order to help you draw near to God.

This is one of the things I pray for every week—in my life, for my wife, for my kids. I pray that my kids will have friends who will help them flourish in their faith. Don’t we all want that for our children and teenagers? Students, prioritize friends who are helping you flourish in your faith. I pray this for Heather, for myself.

I pray for the members of this church family, that you would have people in your life—not just from a distance, but up close and personal—who are helping you flourish in your faith; helping you draw near to God. You are closer to God as a result of being around this person.

2. Hold on to hope – Hebrews 10:23

Mike: The second principle is we help each other hold on to hope. Verse 23 says, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering...” Why? “...[F]or he who promised is faithful.” The hope mentioned here isn’t wishful thinking. The hope described in the New Testament is confident expectation of future good. It’s living life with a deep assurance that the pain we’re feeling or the problem we’re facing isn’t the end of the story.

Here's why that's so important. Every single one of us is tempted and prone to mishandle our hope. Think about how we do that. We're tempted to base our hope on the things of this world, things that will inevitably fail us at some point. When those things are going well in our lives, our joy and confidence about the future is high. But when those things break down, then our hope has nothing to stand on. That's why we're so often tempted to lose hope altogether.

So as a church, we have to encourage each other and help each other hold on to the hope that is offered in God's Word. It's a hope that's not based on our circumstances or how we feel. It's a hope that's based on the character and promises of an all-powerful and unchanging God.

3. Grow in love and good works – Hebrews 10:24

David: Then there's the last principle in verse 24: "*Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.*" So we help each other flourish in faith, hold on to hope, then we help each other grow in love and good works. I love this verse. This is what the church does; we help each other love people better. We stir up each other to do more good works. We are more loving people doing more good deeds because of the people who are around us in the church.

Think about this practically. Don't you want to be around other husbands who make you a better husband? Or other wives who help you be a better wife? Don't you want to be around other singles who are showing how to maximize singleness for the spread of the gospel and God's glory? Don't you want to be around other teenagers, college students, young adults, senior adults, other people who inspire you to greater love for your neighbor and to more faithfully share the gospel with others? This is so key to us thriving.

Exhibit A of this has been all that you as a church have done in this city during this pandemic. I cannot say enough about how proud I am of God's grace in you as a church. Think about it. Do you realize what's happened during a time of such tension in our city and country over the last nine or ten months? There is such division, with people debating and dividing over everything from masks to politics. What you have done is come together and given millions of dollars and spent thousands of hours, side by side, packing and distributing food and the gospel to people in need all across our city.

In other words, instead of stirring up tension, division and anger in each others' lives, you've stirred up love and good works in each others' lives. Yes! This is what we're created to do. This is the church. Let's keep doing it. Go on line and sign up to serve and give, to stir up love and good works in each other. Let's show Metro Washington DC that this is who the church is. This is what the church does.

Isn't this an awesome, beautiful, powerful picture of the church in Hebrews 10? These people were helping each other flourish in faith, holding on to hope in hard times and stirring each other up to love and good works. Apparently the church is not merely a building you come to, where you sit with other people in a service, then you walk away into the next week. The church isn't just a service you just tune into on

TV or a tablet then wait to do it again the next week. The church is a body, a community—literally a family—that flourishes in faith, holds on to hope, shows love and produces good works together.

This leads to the question how can each of us thrive as part of a church family like this? God answers that question in His Word in ways we might not think. God doesn't tell us to prioritize some of the things we might think of, like a great building, great programs, a slick website or a hip pastor. You laugh because we've clearly not prioritized that last one on this side of the stage; Mike is a little closer to hip over there.

Instead, God says give yourselves together to these things. Here at McLean Bible Church, we've summarized "these things" in 12 traits of a church. We've said that if we will give ourselves to these things that God has spelled out in His Word, then we can trust that God will help us all to thrive in our faith. It's like giving water, sunlight and nutrients to a plant. These simple things will help us thrive, but if we neglect these things, we will wither.

So you may have some of those other things, like building programs, websites or a hip pastor. But even if you have none of those things, wherever you are in the world—whether you're in Metro Washington DC or the Middle East—as long as you prioritize these 12 things, you can thrive together as part of a church. I say over and over again that my prayer and goal for every member of this church family is that God would be able to pick up any one of you, put you anywhere in the world and you would know how to be a disciple of Jesus, how to make disciples of Jesus and how to gather together with the church with only His Word, His Spirit and each other, without dependence on anything else.

So in the last part of our time today, Mike and I want to remind us of these 12 traits. We did a whole series on them a couple years ago, but for some of you they'll be totally new. Regardless, I want to encourage you to write these down; we're going to hit them quickly. I'm actually starting an online class for ten weeks. Anyone who wants to join in can be a part. You can watch it anytime at mcleanbible.org/12traits. Whether you've been a member of MBC for decades or you're new to MBC, if you want to know what we're prioritizing as a church, we're going to focus on these 12 traits. Mike and I are just going to give an overview of them here.

Twelve traits of a biblical church we see in Scripture, given to us that we might thrive together:

1. Biblical evangelism – Matthew 16:13-20

Mike: The first mention of the church in the New Testament is in Matthew 16:13-20 where Jesus promises to build His church. Like David said, it's not that the church is a building or a Sunday event. Rather, the church is a community of people who are united around the central proclamation that Jesus is Lord. That's the greatest news in the world.

So if you're just exploring Christianity and you have questions, you need to listen in. Jesus is Who He claimed to be—the Messiah, God Himself, Who came to us in human flesh in order to accomplish what we could not accomplish on our own. He lived and perfectly fulfilled God's commandments so that through faith in Him, we could have the righteousness we need in order to be acceptable to God. He died and fully satisfied God's judgment—the judgment we deserve for our sins—so that through faith in Him, we can be forgiven. Then He rose from the dead proving He has ultimate authority and power over Satan, sin and death, and promising that one day He's going to return as the supreme Judge and the sovereign King over all of creation. Jesus is Lord.

That's the good news of the gospel and that's why we celebrate. The Lord has come and has accomplished salvation for all those who will receive Him by faith. So just as He did for the early church in Acts 2, Jesus empowers His church today to spread that good news to everybody we can.

2. Biblical teaching and preaching – 2 Timothy 3:13 – 4:5

David: This is what makes us a church: we proclaim Jesus as Lord. What brings us together is the Lordship of Jesus. It's on our lips throughout our lives. But we don't stop just with the proclamation that Jesus is Lord. The second trait is biblical teaching and preaching. It's not just proclaiming Jesus as Lord; it's proclaiming all of God's Word, from cover to cover in the Bible. This is why we devote a significant amount of our time when we gather to the teaching of this Word, because Jesus leads His church according to His Word. We'll mention this a little more when we talk about biblical leadership, but one of the necessary competencies of a pastor in the church is he must be able to teach God's Word. Here's why that is.

Picture the setup here. Jesus is the leader, the Chief Shepherd, of the church. How does Jesus lead His church? He entrusts undershepherds—pastors—who teach accurately, faithfully, completely and only His Word. Not their thoughts or opinions or ideas, because that would lead a church to become like that pastor. No, they teach Jesus' words, Jesus' thoughts, Jesus' truth, so the church becomes like Jesus.

This is why biblical teaching and preaching is necessary in a church. It's why my job—the job of any pastor who teaches in this church—is to stand before you and not say what I think or what Mike thinks or what anybody else thinks, but what God thinks. The only way to know exactly what God thinks is if we see it in His Word. That means that Mike or I or anybody else who teaches in the church must be able to show you in God's Word anything we call you to believe or do. If we can't show it to you in God's Word, then you should not be listening to us. If we can show it to you in God's Word, then we are all accountable for believing and doing what we see.

Biblical preaching and teaching are so important, not just in our Sunday gatherings, but in church groups and every other facet of the church. Suffice it to say, all of our teaching in the church must be totally tethered to God's Word and God's Spirit, which leads to the next trait.

3. Biblical prayer – Acts 1:14, 2:1-13, 2:42

Mike: The church really is a movement of God’s Spirit which we see through biblical prayer. If you think about the book of Acts, you can’t help but notice how often the early church prayed. They prayed to give thanks to God in their weekly gatherings, to plead for God’s help in difficult situations and to seek God’s wisdom before making major decisions. They were always praying. That’s why in Acts 1:14 and Acts 2:42, Luke describes them as constantly devoting themselves to prayer.

Think about that phrase, “devoting themselves to prayer” and how God was constantly responding to their prayers. The gospel was spreading. Lives were being transformed. Sick people were being healed. Leaders were being multiplied. New churches were being started. As they kept praying, the Holy Spirit kept working. In any and every situation they found themselves in, they knew they had access to the presence and power of Almighty God. And so do we.

That’s why prayer has to be our first response, not our last resort as individuals, as we think about our personal lives and our families, but also together as a church family. That’s why prayer is such a critical part of our vision and strategy in this new chapter together as a church. You can read more about our vision on our website at mcleanbible.org/anewchapter. Some of you have read through that already. At the bottom of that page, you can access our New Chapter Prayer Guide that will help you pray for our church. We want to be a church that is characterized by biblical prayer, a church that constantly prays for that which can only be accomplished by God’s power and attributed to God’s glory.

4. Biblical discipleship – Deuteronomy 6:1-9

David: That leads to the fourth trait of a church: biblical discipleship. I want you to see how these all fit together. We come to faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord, we learn God’s Word, we seek God together through prayer, then as these things are happening, we grow as disciples of Jesus who are learning to walk with God. Discipleship is the process by which we are drawing closer and closer to God and becoming more and more like Jesus in our lives. Much like we’ve already talked about, we do this by helping each other flourish in faith, hold on to hope and grow in love and good works.

One of my favorite verses along these lines is 1 Timothy 4:7: “...*train yourself for godliness...*” The word there for “train” is *gumnazo* from which we get our word gymnasium today. That’s what the church is in a sense. You’re coming to a gym when you come to a gathering of the church. It’s a place for training disciples of Jesus. You don’t go to a gym just to sit and watch. You go to a gym to get stronger. That’s what biblical discipleship is all about. Our gatherings—our church groups and other ministries—are designed to be like gymnasiums, strengthening each other’s faith as members of a body who belong to each other. .

5. Biblical membership – 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Mike: A church should be—and we strive to be—a community that’s warm and welcoming to all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds and beliefs. But the actual members of a church are those who have made a commitment to follow Jesus together as a church family. Church members are people who give credible evidence of repentance from sin and who are safe in the Lord Jesus Christ. They commit to gathering together on a regular basis in order to be the body of Christ to one another. Becoming a member of a church is so important because God wants every Christian to be known and cared for by church members and local leaders.

6. Biblical leadership – 1 Timothy 3:1-13

David: I mentioned this sixth trait briefly already when we were talking about biblical preaching and teaching. God has designed leaders in the church to help us in all these ways. They help us flourish in faith, hold on to hope and stir one another up to love and good works. The Bible recognizes two types of leaders in the church. The first is pastors or elders or overseers. Those are actually interchangeable terms we see at different times in the Bible. God sets these pastors/elders/overseers up to be models of Jesus’ character and to teach His Word, as they love, lead, serve and shepherd the church. The picture of a shepherd means they nourish, cherish, guard and protect God’s people with a humble authority to lead church members to be more like Jesus. They are to lovingly lead the people to responsibility, accountability and to serve other church members faithfully.

God also calls deacons to support pastors and meet needs among God’s people. The clearest place where we see both these alongside each other in Scripture is 1 Timothy 3:1-13. There’s a ton more we can talk about here. I think we all realize that biblical leadership is critical in a church. If the church is led by people who are not walking with Jesus, who are not teaching or leading according to God’s Word, then that church will inevitably go astray.

I would ask you to please pray for leaders in this church—Mike, myself, Wade, location pastors and so many others, staff, elders, leaders across the church—that we would love Jesus and serve the church with wisdom according to God’s Word. Speaking of praying for each other along those lines, that actually leads to the next trait.

7. Biblical fellowship – Romans 12:1-21

Mike: Let’s just be honest, sometimes churches can feel like movie theaters, where we gather for the same event, we enjoy the same experience and we might even give cordial hellos on our way in and out. But listen to how the Bible describes what relationships should be like in the local church. There are over 50 “one anothers” in the New Testament; listen to some of these.

Members of the church love one another (John 13:34-35). They encourage one another and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11). They care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25), serve one another (Galatians 5:13; 1 Peter 4:10) and bear each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2). They're kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32), even in heavy, divisive seasons. They forgive each other (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). They confess their sins to one another (James 5:16). They teach, admonish (Colossians 3:16) and exhort one another (Hebrews 3:13) with the Word of God. Romans 12:10 summarizes it all by saying church members should be devoted to one another. God wants us to be involved in each other's lives and to know each other well enough to help each other grow.

I was talking to one of our group leaders this week. Their group all met together to determine who and what they wanted to be as a group. They committed to being "all in" together as a church family. So even during the pandemic, they have continued to meet over Zoom or in driveways, just trying to stay faithful to the commitment they made to really be a biblical family to each other.

Two young adults in their group, Alex and Sophie, are getting married soon. Due to the pandemic, the groups couldn't celebrate in person, so last week they had an online celebration together. They all dressed up, lit candles, decorated their computer screens. They all brought their own sparkling cider and toasted this engaged couple. Then each group member came prepared to share a Scripture or a prayer with the couple. After everybody had shared and the group prayed over them, Alex—just overwhelmed in that moment—shared that this was the first time in their lives they had experienced a true biblical family in a local church.

Do you have these family-like relationships in your local church? We may not be able to have that kind of relationship with every member in the church, but every member in the church should have these kinds of relationships with at least some members in the church.

8. Biblical accountability and discipline – Matthew 18:15-20

David: These relationships are what we long for, for every member of this body and for those who are listening in from beyond Metro Washington DC. Related to this would be the next trait: biblical accountability and discipline. Now, when we hear this one, it might sound a little hard. I think this is one of the most misunderstood traits of a church in the Bible and often ignored, which is sad, because it's one of the ways we most clearly show God's love as the church.

The picture here is when we see someone else in the church entangled in sin or walking in disobedience to God, we are to love that brother or sister enough to go to them, first one on one, but if that doesn't work, with a couple people. Jesus outlined the process for this in Matthew 18. Eventually others in the church, if needed, are brought in to help that person keep from walking away from Jesus.

Whenever I think about accountability and discipline like this, I realize that I want and need this in my life. If I'm doing something that doesn't honor Jesus or doesn't honor my wife or my kids, then I

want and need people in my life who won't just say, "Well, that's your problem," and leave me to myself and my sin. If I'm headed toward a cliff, I want somebody to love me enough to say to me, "Stop!" and pull me back.

I'm so thankful for how Mike and others here do this in my life. This is what biblical accountability and discipline is. God has designed us to thrive through loving, humble pursuit of each other when we're caught in sin, or when we need restoration to intimacy with Jesus. That's what biblical accountability and discipline are all about.

9. Biblical worship – John 4-26

Mike: Biblical worship is what we're gathered to do now, whether you're sitting in this room, at one of our other locations, or watching online with friends or family. God is better than anything in the universe. He's absolutely better. He's the Creator Who has ultimate power and authority over all of creation. He's the source and sustainer of everything we enjoy. Even though we deserve to be crushed by His greatness and cut off from His goodness, He loved us so much that He made a way for us to be forgiven of our sin, so that we can enjoy eternal life with Him.

When you truly understand Who God is and what He has done for us, then worship becomes our most reasonable response, not just a religious routine. Worship is our humble and joyful response to the goodness and greatness of God. Worship is the joy of our lives. That's why churches prioritize gathering together in corporate worship, not just because God commands it—which He does—but because we are people who are eager to express our praise and enjoy God's presence together.

We don't just worship Him in whatever ways we want; we worship Him in the ways He wants. That includes singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs that are saturated with biblical truth (Ephesians 5:19-21). It's worship that includes the public reading of Scripture, the testimonies of God's people, prayer and fasting. All of the church's worship aims to glorify God and edify His people.

Listen to me—you need this in your life, not just online. There's something about physically gathering with people who are filled with God's Spirit, hearing each other singing and praising God, seeing each other's faces and being reminded that we're not alone as we follow Jesus. It means encouraging each other with our "Amens" and "Hallelujahs," even during a pandemic. Speaking of a pandemic, as soon as you feel safe—even if you're watching online during this season—I want to encourage you to make physically gathering in corporate worship a top priority in your life.

10. Biblical ordinances - Acts 2:27-41; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

David: Related to biblical worship are biblical ordinances—biblical actions. It's interesting to think about how God has designed two specific ordinances that we do in our worship to help us thrive.

One is the Lord's Supper, which I eagerly look forward to doing again as a church. We've not been doing this because of the sanitation concerns with passing cups and bread. But when we come together for worship, God tells us to take a piece of bread and remember the body of Jesus given for our sin, then to drink from a cup to remember the blood of Jesus given for our sins. This physical activity is critical to our spiritual thriving. Through it we reflect on our sins and salvation, as well as His sustenance in our lives and the promise of His return for us when we're going to gather around God's table and feast forever on His goodness.

Then there's baptism, when Jesus calls every member of the church, as a picture of faith in Him, to be immersed in water, identifying with Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. We're starting to do baptisms again; we actually have a baptism we'll be celebrating at the end of our next service. So if you're a new follower of Jesus, or if you're a follower of Jesus who has never been baptized, I invite you to do this. As we look forward, Lord willing, we plan to get back together and eventually be able to baptize people on a weekly basis as they come to faith in Jesus.

The point is these are practices we do as the church. We don't baptize on our own; we don't take the Lord's Supper on our own. We do these things together in ways that help us thrive as the church.

All right, we're on the last two, but by no means the least two.

11. Biblical giving – 1 Corinthians 16:1-4

Mike: God is so generous and abundantly gracious toward us in ways that not only meet our spiritual needs but also our physical needs. First Timothy 6:17 reminds us that God richly provides us with everything to enjoy. He's the source. He's the ultimate owner of all the resources we've been blessed with. So as recipients of His generosity, we have a responsibility—and we have an amazing opportunity—to use the resources He's given us in ways that bless others and serve His Kingdom purposes. This is why we as followers of Jesus give our money, time and other resources to and through the local church. Members of the church give of their resources freely and joyfully in order to support those who teach them the Word in a variety of ways across the church, to help cover the expenses of the church, to provide relief for the poor and to advance the gospel around the world. As we seek and surrender to God's leadership, 2 Corinthians 9:7 says each of us must give as he has decided in his heart, *“not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”*

David: Just as a reminder, the primary way we are giving, during this season especially, is online at mcleanbible.org/give. We are still bringing in the final numbers from last year, but I want to report that you gave over and above in such a way that at the end of the year, we ended up with a significant surplus. All glory to God for instilling that generous heart in you. I praise God for your generosity. We're able, as a church together, to thrive through that kind of giving.

The picture here is that God has also designed you individually to thrive as you give. It's a pretty clear biblical picture, that if you keep your resources to yourself, you will wither. Physically giving is a part of spiritually thriving.

12. Biblical mission – Romans 15:8-27

David: This leads to the last trait which will actually set the stage for our time together next week. So listen real closely here about biblical mission. Every week, as the church, we close our gatherings with saying the Great Commission to one another, “*Go and make disciples...*” (Matthew 28:18-20). This is something we do right where we live. We share the gospel right here in this city.

Jesus did not just say, “Go and make disciples right where you live.” He said, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” The word He uses for “nations” is *ethnos*, referring to all the ethnic groups in the world. This means we as the church, if we're going to be obedient to what we say to each other every week, must spread the gospel, not just where we live, but far from where we live, particularly in places where the gospel hasn't gone. We do that in different ways: through praying, giving and going. Sometimes we go on short-term trips to other places. But follow this. In any healthy biblical church, God will continually call some people to move to other places for the spread of the gospel specifically where the gospel has not gone.

That's what happened in Acts 13:1-3. The church at Antioch is worshiping, fasting and praying, then the Holy Spirit says, “...*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*” Specifically that work was taking the gospel to places where it hadn't gone. Acts 13:3 says, “*Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*”

This is a picture that we want to be accurately seeing at MBC, especially when you consider the situation today. Right now there are approximately three billion people in the world and over 7,000 ethnic groups who have little to no access to the gospel. In other words, they don't even know the truth about Jesus. It's not that they've heard the truth about Jesus and have rejected Him; they've never even heard the truth about Him.

So let me ask a simple logical question. If there are three billion people in the world and over 7,000 ethnic groups who haven't heard the gospel, and there are thousands of us with the gospel as part of this church, do you think it's possible that God by His Spirit is calling some of us to take the gospel to them? It seems not just possible, but probable, when you consider how much God loves all three billion of those people and that Jesus died to bring salvation to every one of those people groups.

Next Sunday, at the end of this month of prayer and fasting together as a church, we're going to have an “Acts 13” day. We're asking God specifically next Sunday to set apart some from among us to go to those who have not yet heard the gospel. Here's what I want to ask every single follower of Jesus within the sound of my voice to do this week. In preparation for our time together next Sunday, I want to ask you

to pray this week, , “God, I will go if You want me to go.” That’s all I’m asking, for each of us to lay our lives and families down before God in a fresh way this week, saying, “God, I will go if You want me to go.”

I’m going to be praying this. My family is going to be praying this. Mike and his family are going to be praying this. We’re all going to pray this together and maybe even set aside a day to fast. Together we’re going to ask God, “Who among us are You sending out?” and then see how He answers. Then don’t miss being a part of worship next week. Don’t skip next week because you’re afraid He might say you’re supposed to go. That would miss the whole point of everything we’re trying to do here.

Let’s come together next Sunday in anticipation of God doing Acts 13 among any one of us. This is biblical mission. According to God, we will not thrive as a church if we are ignoring three billion people who have never heard the gospel if we’re not sending people out to take the gospel where it hasn’t gone.

All right, Mike, any closing thoughts as we think about how God has designed us to thrive as a church?

Mike: I was thinking about my college days when I first started seriously following Jesus. If you’re a college or high school student, I really want you to lean in and listen. I bought into something that I think many of us are tempted to buy into. When I first started seriously following Jesus, I thought I could genuinely follow Jesus but completely ignore the local church. In fact, I thought the church was so outdated, so disappointing, so boring, that I actually thought investing in the local church would hinder me from thriving in a passionate relationship with God.

Then in my early 20s God began to show me how He sees and feels about the church, even with all its flaws. This is a community to which God Himself has made a covenant commitment. Jesus didn’t just die in order to bring people to God; Jesus died and rose from the grave in order to bring people together into this supernatural, eternal family that puts His grace and glory on display.

We aren’t perfect. Sometimes not only do we get disappointed in the church, but Jesus Himself gets disappointed in the church. Yet He has not and will not give up on us. He is at work, by His Spirit, forming us into a family that brings more and more glory to Himself. One day our local church family will stand together with that great multitude in Revelation 7. A multitude that no one could number—from every nation and from all tribes, peoples and languages—standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in our hands, crying out with a loud voice, “*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*” (Revelation 7:9-12).

Listen, if you’re not a follower of Jesus, that’s our prayer for you. Our ultimate goal is not to get you to join our church here on earth. Our goal and passion is that you would one day be able to stand with that church in heaven, then instead of meeting God face to face as your Judge, through faith in Jesus you would meet God face to face as your Savior.

This isn't just a sermon about the church; it's a sermon about what Jesus has done to purify a people for Himself, to wash their sins clean by His sacrifice, His blood shed on the cross and His resurrection from the grave. It's not ultimately about the church; it's what Jesus has done for each one of us in bringing us together as the church. This is what He wants to do in your life.

We want to give you an opportunity today, if you've sensed God stirring and working in your heart. Maybe you still have questions, but you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God has been drawing you and calling you. You know you've been at the point where you've said, "I want to follow Jesus. I know I need to surrender my life. I know I need to turn from my sin and believe the gospel." I want to encourage you today to put your trust in Jesus.

David is going to lead us to close this time in prayer. I want to encourage you, even as he leads us in prayer, to express your own faith to God by putting your trust in Jesus.

David: Will you bow your heads with me? I just want to ask every single person, in this room and online, are you in Jesus? Have you put your trust in Jesus? Do you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you will be around that throne that day, praising Him as Lord of your life?

If your answer is not a resounding yes in your heart, I want to invite you right now to pray, to make this the day when you confess Jesus as Lord. Just say to God, "I know I have sinned against You, God. Today I confess that Jesus has died on the cross for my sin and He is Lord of my life. Today I trust You with my life. Today I have become a part of Your church, Your people, who are confessing You as Lord. Even amidst questions I may still have, I trust in You."

O God, I pray that You would give life to that kind of faith today, that You would expand Your church today. Then God, for us as this expression of Your church, we pray that You would help us become more and more the church You've designed us to be. God, we pray You would help each of us thrive in our lives through our church being all these things, being faithful in all these traits. Help us, we pray, to help each other flourish in faith, hold on to hope and grow in love and good works in the world around us, so that the world might know that You are God, You are good and You, Jesus, are Savior, Lord and King of kings. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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