## Building Healthy Churches

**Biblical Theology, Obedience, and Healthy Churches**

28 July 2018

It has been a wonderful week, and we have covered a lot of ground. Thank you for being a part of it. The goal for today is to try and bring everything together into a coherent whole, and bring all our discussion to bear on the Church. Let me simply share a few general theses statements . . .

1. We have learned this week that the question of obedience in the Christian life is one that takes some serious and sustained thought. Hence, a healthy church should be one that encourages serious, sustained, study and exploration of the Scriptures.
2. We have also learned that to understand an issue like obedience requires an understanding of the overall meaning of the Bible, and requires one to be able to relate the issues being studied—here obedience—to the overall meaning of the Bible, and in particular to the person and work of Christ. Hence, a healthy church will find ways to encourage biblical theology amongst its members.
3. We have seen that *earlier* theological voices within the Evangelical tradition were quite happy and eager to affirm the importance and necessity of works, obedience, and faithfulness in the Christian life. For whatever reason, this strong biblical theme sometimes gets short shrift in our day. So, healthy churches will find ways to immerse itself in the Scriptures in order to discern if one’s own historical and cultural moment is subtly (not so subtly?) marginalizing or ignoring certain strands of biblical teaching. *Semper reformanda—*“always to be reformed.”
4. We have seen that the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is central to the initiation of our salvation. But we have also seen that the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is central to our entire Christian life, to our sanctification, to our ongoing works, obedience, and faithfulness. So, healthy churches will spend time thinking about both the *accomplishment* of redemption and the *application* of redemption which are both important, and will spend time thinking through the multiple benefits for the Christian of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.
5. We have seen that while it is you and I who must “work out our salvation,” and “put to death the deeds of the body,” etc., it is God who is at work in us to will and work according to his good and perfect purpose (Philippians 2:12-13). Thus, there is an efficacy to the grace of God which drives Christians to the knees in humility and thanksgiving for the grace of God. Subsequently, healthy churches in which members are grasping the magnificent grace of God should be marked by a genuine and sober humility.
6. We have seen that to understand the place of obedience in the Christian life requires understanding something of what God is doing in history, and *God’s* means for accomplishing that. God is building a house/temple, is preparing a bride (the Church) for the bridegroom (Christ). In short, God is preparing a people with whom He will dwell (“I will be their God, and they will be my people”). God’s people are being conformed to the image of His Son over time (i.e., they are becoming more and more like Jesus, who obeyed his Father; hence *we* become those who obey, over time—if imperfect ones who obey!). Hence, biblical teaching on “building” each other up (Eph. 4:29), and how we should “stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:24-25) takes on a different sense­—fellow-Christians in building each other up, and in stirring one another to love and good works are ultimately means of grace to one another. When we encourage, when we stir one another up to love and good works, we are playing a role in helping our fellow-Christians become the persons we are called to be—as we are all shaped into the house/temple and bride of Christ. As such, a healthy church should be filled with lots of talk—encouraging talk and “provoking-one-another-up” talk.
7. Given what we have just said (point #6), it is worth noting what Hebrews 10:24-25 says: “24And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25not 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.” The author links (1) the importance of gathering together, with (2) stirring up one another to love and good works, with (3) the “Day” [of the Lord]. Hence, this stirring up language seems to require meaningful and regular relationships that Christians have with one another. This seems to subtly or not-too-subtly point to something like the importance of church membership. Hence, healthy churches will be churches where (at least something like) membership is practiced, and where church members take it upon themselves to stir others up, and understand the importance of being stirred up by others.
8. We have seen that God is concerned with the transformation of all members of the “house/temple”, the entire bride of Christ. The “true” Church does not center in or consist in the leadership of a local church, or in a regional, nation, or multi-national bishop/elder/pastor or head. Hence, in healthy churches there should be little “we” versus “they” talk (i.e., “we”—not really the church, talking about the “they”—the *real* church, or the *heart of* the church). In a healthy church, there is the understanding that the church is constituted by all the members of a local church.
9. We have learned this week that while works, obedience, and faithfulness are essential in the Christian life, they are not somehow autonomously-generated realities. The fount or source of our works, obedience, and faithfulness is the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (=the key events of the gospel). We see that in the New Testament that the power of the Gospel is unleashed when the Gospel itself is proclaimed (Rom. 1:16-17; 2 Cor. 4:1-6). Hence, if the people of God are going to themselves live in and experience the very power of God, there must be an ongoing experience of the faithful preaching of the gospel message. Hence, healthy churches will be churches where the gospel itself is faithfully preached. Hence, healthy churches that both the Christian and the non-Christian need to be—properly understood—evangelized.
10. We have seen this week that one of the realities foreshadowed in Jeremiah 31 is that in the New Covenant all covenant members will know him. Hence we see that there is no room in healthy churches for “nominal” Christianity. To truly be in the New Covenant is to know God. And healthy churches will always be passionately committed to the importance of conversion, and will be zealous to see persons confessing Christ as Lord, to coming to faith in Christ.