

FORGING OUR CHURCH INTO A CARING COMMUNITY

Purpose of this Bible Class series: To lead all participants

1. to a deeper understanding of God's vision for a Christian congregation and to a stronger determination to help make their congregation more fully such a congregation;
2. to see more clearly and appreciate more fully what it means to be loved by God in Christ;
3. to desire more eagerly to love others-fellow members and visitors to the congregation-in the way that they are loved by God.

PART ONE: GOD'S DIRECTION FOR A CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION

Introduction

Discuss: Why does our congregation exist?

I. The Kinds of Direction a Christian Congregation Can Take

A. Concern for the preservation and growth of the Church - Three "formal goals":

1. *Fellowship* Within a Christian congregation a gathering of believers has the opportunity to become in actual practice what the Holy Spirit has made of them: one body in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13, 27);

to express visibly the truth of Ephesians 4, that there is but "one body..., one Spirit..., one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all";

to experience personally the "tie that binds our hearts in Christian love" (1 John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 1:10).
2. *Nurture* Within a Christian congregation a gathering of believers has the opportunity to help one other grow in faith through the Word. This is where Christian education comes in--for children, but also for adults (Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11).
3. *Outreach* This is the other side of fellowship and nurture. Through fellowship and nurture we strengthen each other. Through outreach we bring the gospel to those outside the body. Within a Christian congregation a gathering of believers has the opportunity to reach out to others with the gospel so that the Holy Spirit can bring them also into the Church where they can enjoy the fellowship of believers and the continuing nurture of the Word (Matthew 22:1-10; Acts 13:1-3).

B. Concern for preservation and growth of the *institution*

1. Three "survival goals"
 - a. *Members:* Getting more

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

Library

6633 W. WARTBURG CIRCLE
MEQUON, WISCONSIN 53092

- b. *Buildings*: Constructing and maintaining property and buildings
- c. *Money*: Raising more
- 2. A vicious circle. More members leads to need for more buildings which produces need for more money, which leads to need for more members, etc.
 - a. When does the circle end? Presumably, when the property is filled with buildings, there are enough members to keep things on an even keel, and a budget that doesn't unduly stretch anyone's pocketbook.
 - b. Do you see yourself, your congregation, here?
 - 1) Examine Church Council, Voters' Assembly agendas
 - 2) What is being emphasized, survival or LIFE?

II. The Direction the First Christian Congregation Took

- A. Read Acts 2:42-47 for an overview
- B. The first Christian congregation paid no attention to "survival goals"
- C. It exhibited a deep concern for "formal goals"
 - 1. *Fellowship*: Acts 2:42, "They devoted themselves to...the fellowship"
 - a. Acts 12:5 - How did they express their fellowship?
 - b. Acts 2:44-45, 4:32,34-35 - What is another way they expressed their fellowship?
 - c. Acts 4:36 (compare 9:27; 11:23; 15:37-40) - What is a third way they expressed their fellowship?
 - 2. *Nurture*: Acts 2:42, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching"
 - a. The apostles kept teaching
 - 1) Acts 4:33 - What was their main message?
 - 2) Acts 5:40-42 - How devoted were they to teaching?
 - 3) Acts 6:1-3 - How was it possible for the apostles to find time for teaching as the church grew?
 - b. The church kept learning

Acts 2:46 - What do we learn about the kinds of groups in which the church gathered to learn the "apostles' teaching"?

c. Acts 8:1-5 - What did those who were taught then do?

3. *Outreach*

a. Person-to-person outreach

1) Acts 2:47 - What kind of person-to-person outreach do we see here?

2) Acts 8:1-4 - What kind of person-to-person outreach did these believers carry out?

b. Vicarious evangelism

1) Acts 6:1-6 - How did the seven "deacons" vicariously support the work of outreach?

2) Acts 13:1-3 - What is one special way by which the congregation at Antioch reached out vicariously to the world?

III. The Results

Read Acts 2:47b; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31

What happened?

Summary

God's direction for a Christian congregation:

- 1) *A loving fellowship*
- 2) *A faith-building fellowship*
- 3) *A Gospel-sharing fellowship*

Modeled by the Jerusalem congregation

Graphically displayed by Jesus:

Gathered the 12 into a close fellowship;

Intensely nurtured them to build up their faith;

Sent them out with the Gospel.

The ideal Christian congregation:

A caring community

A nurturing community

A sharing (mission-minded) community

PART TWO: THE CHRISTIAN--CARED FOR

Introduction

1. Zeroing in on the fellowship (caring) aspect of part one
2. Progression: The Christian--Cared For
 The Christian--Caring
 Caring for the Visitor
 Caring for Our Fellow Members

I. God Cares for Us with an *Agape* Love

A. Three Other Greek Words for Love

1. *Storge*

- a. The natural affection parents have for children and children for parents
- b. Not in New Testament except in negative form, "without natural affection" (Romans 1:31, 2 Timothy 3:1-3), which assumes that having "natural affection" or "family love" is something good
- c. Important, for without it the family would have difficulty existing

2. *Philia*

- a. Built on common insights, interests, or tastes
- b. Valuable in that it enriches one's life
- c. Used only once in the New Testament (James 4:4), yet pleasing to God

3. *Eros*

- a. Characterized by two things
 - 1) Love of the worthy or attractive
 - 2) Love that desires to possess
- b. Not found in the New Testament, though, again, certainly not contrary to it (Hebrews 13:4; 1 Timothy 4:1-4)
- c. At times in secular literature used of the love of what is good, even of love of what is divine (love of the "gods")

B. The Word for God's Kind of Love: *Agape*

1. A relatively rare word before the New Testament

2. Almost the only word for love used by the New Testament writers

C. God's Love (*agape*) Is Seen Most Clearly in the Light of the Cross

1. Each of the following passages tells us certain things about the love of God-*agape*. As you read them, seek to answer this question: What are the distinguishing marks of the *agape* of God?
 - a. 1 John 4:10
 - b. John 3:16
 - c. Romans 5:6-8
 - d. Ephesians 2:1-5,8-9
2. How might one define *agape*?

D. *Agape* Compared with *Storge*, *Philia* and *Eros*

1. *Storge*, *philia* and *eros* have to do with feelings that are aroused by the object of one's love
 - a. *storge*: He or she is family
 - b. *philia*: He or she is my friend
 - c. *eros*: He or she makes me feel good
2. God's *agape* is aroused
 - a. not by what we are, but by what he is
 - b. not by the fact that we are lovable, but by the fact that he is love (1 John 4:8)

Summary

God's love, *agape*, as revealed in the Scriptures is unlike any other love. It does not look for something of worth, some kind of attractiveness, on the part of the potential recipient of His love. It does not contemplate what kind of return it might get from a person to determine whether or not it is worthwhile to give him His love. God's love is a giving love through and through. The cross of Jesus is the outstanding demonstration of the love of God.

II. The *Agape* of God Creates a Proper Self-Image in Us

- A. A basic need of every human being: To regard himself/herself as a worthwhile human being
 1. One sub-need: Significance
 2. A second sub-need: Security

- B. The human struggle to meet that need: Achievement
 - 1. By attempting to satisfy some other person(s)
 - 2. By attempting to satisfy God
- C. God's answer to meet that need: Grace—His *agape* as seen in the light of the cross
 - 1. God didn't overlook my sins
 - 2. He paid the penalty for them all
 - 3. Result: Peace, rest, security, significance
 - 4. A picture of the spiritually healthy Christian:
 - a. Doesn't deny in any way the wrath of God against sin and the fact that he or she is a poor, miserable sinner
 - b. Knows that he or she doesn't bring anything of value to God to warrant His love
 - c. But daily lays hold of and rejoices in the *agape* of God as demonstrated by the cross and in what God has made of him or her in Christ: a brand new creation, created, loved, redeemed, gifted to carry out God's purposes in the world
 - 5. The source of a proper self-image: Look at yourself as God looks at you through Jesus
 - a. I am loved. I am accepted. I am of use to God.
 - b. I am not a nobody. I am a somebody in the eyes of the one whose opinion of me counts the most (1 Corinthians 4:2)

Summary

The *agape* of God assures me that I am loved. It gives me a proper, Christian self-image that cannot be gained in any other way.

For Discussion

- 1. Comment on this statement: "God does not love us because we are valuable; we are valuable because God loves us"
- 2. How should a Christian picture God in his mind's eye?
- 3. Agree or Disagree? Because God made me and "God don't make no junk," I have every reason to have a positive self-image.
- 4. Is there such a thing as a proper self-love?

PART THREE: THE CHRISTIAN: CARING

Introduction

1. God cares for us with an *agape* love, a love that gives, irrespective of merit or demand for a return of love
2. God's *agape* is seen most clearly in the light of the cross
3. The *agape* of God gives the believer a proper self-image; for the One who counts the most assures the believer that he or she is loved

I. The Love of God Transforms Us into Loving Persons

- A. 1 John 4:7,8,19 - "Love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love....We love because he first loved us"

Luke 7:47 - "Her many sins have been forgiven-for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little"

Summary sentence: God's *agape* gives birth to *agape* in us so that we now love others with the love with which God loves us in Christ.

- B. 1 John 3:14 - "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers"

1 John 3:10 - "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother"

John 13:35 - "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"

Summary sentence: *Agape* is evidence of our new birth; it identifies us as Christians.

- C. 1 John 4:21 - "He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother"

John 13:34 - "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"

Romans 13:8,9 - "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law....Love your neighbor as yourself"

Summary sentence: *Agape* for others is God's will for us.

- D. Galatians 5:22 - "The fruit of the Spirit is love..."

Romans 5:5 - "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us"

Summary sentence: *Agape* is the first-fruit of the Spirit.

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY
Library

6633 W. WARTBURG CIRCLE
MEQUON, WISCONSIN 53092

- E. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 - "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing"

Summary sentence: Agape is the essential element of the Christian life.

Summary

There is no such thing as a non-caring Christian. If we have been born of God, this *will* reveal itself in our relations with others, with brothers and sisters in the faith especially, but also with all people. God both wills us to and empowers us to love one another as Christ loved us.

II. We Pattern Our Love After God's Love for Us (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

"Love...

is patient
is kind
does not envy
does not boast
is not proud
is not rude
is not self-seeking
is not easily angered
keeps no record of wrongs
does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth
always protects
always trusts
always hopes
always perseveres"

Summary

The great hymn to love in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 13, provides the *pattern* for Christians to follow. It does not provide the *power*, however. That comes by an ongoing return to the cross, where, in Christ, the forgiving love of God cleanses us and through the Spirit empowers us "dearly loved children" to "be imitators of God" and "live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:1,2).

III. We Display *Agape* by What We Do and by What We Say

A. Actions Display *Agape*

James 2:15,16 - "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"

1 John 3:16-18 - "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth"

B. **Words Display *Agape*:** Hebrews 10:24,25 - "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but *let us encourage one another*-and all the more as you see the Day approaching"

1. The *power* of words

- a. Words can be shallow and meaningless
- b. Words can hurt

Proverbs 18:21 - "Death and life are in the power of the tongue"

James 3:5,6 - "The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue is also a fire, a world of evils among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell"

- c. Words can encourage

Proverbs 12:25 - "Good words can make an anxious heart glad"

Proverbs 16:24 - "Pleasant words...are sweet to the soul and healing to the bones"

Proverbs 25:23 - "How delightful is a timely word"

Proverbs 15:4 - "A soothing tongue is a tree of life"

2. The *process* of caring and encouraging by our words

- a. What you see is not always what is
- b. Listen!
- c. Respond with "door-openers"

For Discussion

1. Agree or Disagree? If any of our fellow members are experiencing financial need, we should direct them to first see what the government can do for them and then to come back to the church, if necessary.
2. Agree or Disagree? If we are taking care of the physical needs of our *fellow members*, we have done all that the Lord expects of us.
3. Discuss ways by which one can be an "encourager" in the congregation.

PART FOUR: CARING FOR THE VISITOR

Introduction

1. God's goals for a Christian congregation:
 - a) Fellowship
 - b) Nurture
 - c) Outreach
2. Fellowship in action:
 - a) The Christian—Cared for
 - b) The Christian—Caring
 - c) This time: The Christian—Caring for the visitor to the service
3. A congregational climate-tester. Rate your congregation on the following continuums according to the way you, a member, feel about your congregation's openness and friendliness:

Friendly	_____	Aloof
Inviting	_____	Foreboding
Warm	_____	Cold
Open	_____	Cliquish

Where do you think a *visitor* would rank your congregation on these continuums?

If there is a difference, what can be done about it?

Use the list on the following page to brainstorm as many ways as you can think of that will help to make a visitor to our congregation know that we care about him or her.

- Ask yourself:
- 1) What could we be doing better?
 - 2) What might we begin to do?
 - 3) What should we stop doing?
 - 4) What can I do to help?

1. Appearance of the property
2. Parking
3. Access to buildings
4. Directional signs
5. Acoustics
6. Service folder
7. Ushers
8. Greeters
9. The Sunday service
10. General congregational atmosphere
11. Other factors?

PART FIVE: CARING FOR ONE'S FELLOW MEMBERS

Introduction

The importance of recognizing people's need for assimilation and then of doing something about it

I. The *Challenge* of Assimilation

- A. 20-year study of all major denominations: 40% of adult converts lost within seven years of reception
- B. Another study: Unless people are assimilated within the first six to nine months, the process may never occur
- C. Applies to youths as well as adults

II. Some *Marks* of an Assimilated Member

- A. Feels a sense of "belonging"
- B. Feels a sense of "ownership" of the church's ministry
- C. Feels he/she can raise questions or opinions about the congregation's work without fear of censure
- D. Feels he/she could talk to the pastor or another member about a personal problem
- E. Sees more blessings than frustrations in his/her church membership
- F. Would recommend his/her church to a friend

III. Some *Factors* Affecting Assimilation

- A. Personal identity - Do members recognize themselves to be valuable children of God, with unique gifts to share?
- B. Mission - Do the members know, identify with, and see themselves as a vital part of the mission of the congregation?
- C. Relationships - Do members feel they are part of a team or do they feel that the church is run by a few?
- D. Warmth/support - Do people feel they are supported, enabled and equipped to succeed at what they are asked to do? Or, are our expectations of workers reasonable. Is the "impossible" being expected, causing people to back away from serving?
- E. Conflict - Do people feel free to express disagreement with what is going on, or does conflict go underground, creating a climate of uneasiness and uncertainty?
- F. Creativity/risk - How often are the words "we always" or "we never" used? Are workers in the church allowed to take some calculated risks that might even result in failure?

IV. Some *Practical Suggestions* to Facilitate Assimilation

What are ways by which we might effectively carry out the following?

Ask yourself:

What could we do better that we are already doing?

What might we begin to do that we are not doing now?

What should we stop doing that we are doing now?

What can I do to help?

- A. Reception/welcoming of new members. What are we doing, what could we be doing to make this a memorable time for people?

- B. Opportunities for people to serve in the congregation. Are there enough opportunities? How are congregational workers recruited? How well? Suggestions for improvement?

- C. Opportunities for developing close fellowship ties with other members. What opportunities are there? Are there enough of them? How do we get people involved with other people?

- D. Information about the work of the congregation. What are the lines of communication? How well are they working? Suggestions for improvement?

- E. Input into the congregation's program? Do all have the opportunity to do this? How? Is it working? Suggestions?

- F. Member Care - What is the procedure for following up on inactive members? How are we doing at assisting one another in time of need—physical, emotional, spiritual? What could we be doing better? How?

- G. Other thoughts?

A final word from the Word:

"Let no debt remain outstanding,
except the continuing debt to love one another.
Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:8,10)

"We love because he first loved us"
(1 John 4:19)

"God demonstrates his own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners,
Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)

The bottom line is the cross of Jesus.
We are loved and cared for.
In Christ we are loving and caring.

David J. Valleskey

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

Library

6603 W. WARTBURG CIRCLE
MEQUON, WISCONSIN 53092