

Supporting One Another in the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I said this morning that this evening would be a little bit different because this is my last service with you as interim moderator.

So I thought it would be fitting just to share some thoughts with you as to how a congregation can prepare for receiving a new minister and his wife, of course, and looking at what the Bible says about ministry, about the church, about what a congregation is, about what we're here for, and I want to be as practical as possible this evening.

So there won't be any doctrinal stuff. There won't be any theology. It's all theology, of course, but theology that doesn't lead to practice is of no use whatsoever.

But hopefully we can take the word tonight, which is a very simple command from God's word, and that we can apply it in your life as a congregation.

I keep on saying our life. It's not our life at all. It's your life. And that's because I psychologically still see myself as connected with Bon Accord, which I suppose will always be the case, but your life as a congregation and the new chapter that you are just about to enter.

[1 : 2 9] And I feel so thrilled for you at this time and for Joe and Susie and can only pray that God will lead you forward together in the work of the gospel and into the future, which only he knows.

The first thing I want us to, well, let's look at the passage first of all and take the reading at verse 12, 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 and verse 12, where Paul says, Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord, and who admonish you.

We're to hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. That command is loaded.

It's absolutely packed with the kind of attitude that needs to be in us as we respond to the ministry of the word.

Acknowledge those who work hard among you. Now, I want you to notice that there's an obligation on them, those who work hard among you, and who care for you in the Lord, and who admonish you.

[2 : 4 6] And we are to hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. So these are the words, or that's the passage or the sentiment that I want us to dwell on this evening.

And I want to be the basis of, hopefully, some thoughts about how to prepare. The first thing that strikes me is how orderly the church is meant to be.

And we find this at various points in the New Testament. And I want to focus particularly on leadership within the church. Now, the leader par excellence in the church is none other than Jesus Christ.

But he sets the standard, and he does so specifically by referring to himself as the good shepherd. Leadership amongst God's people is different from what you'll find in a company or a society where there might be a CEO or some board or another, where you'll find a different kind of authority in the church is servant authority.

It is where we regard ourselves, first of all, as accountable to God. And we never, ever lose sight of that responsibility. And we regard ourselves as leaders, as shepherds over God's people.

[4 : 10] The shepherd, of course, being the Bible picture of the shepherd who comes to know his sheep. I know my sheep, says Jesus, and my sheep know me. That's the picture of the church and its relation to authority.

So it's not, whenever we talk about authority in the church, we're not talking about some autocracy. We're not talking about tyranny. We're not talking about some guy who stands here and tells you what to do because he's decided that's not authority in the church at all.

But when we talk about the ministry of the Word, the authority comes from God. And when we listen to the preaching of the Word, we're listening to God.

Insofar as that preaching is consistent with the Bible, then God is speaking to us. And when he speaks to us, it is incumbent on us to go out and obey.

That's how serious it gets. So there's authority in the church.

[5 : 15] But that authority rests ultimately in God. And it is applied through the leadership that God has ordained or has established within his church.

Now, it seems to me, not everybody will agree with this, depending on what type of church government that you think is biblical. But in Presbyterianism, the church is organized by the authority within the church, is facilitated by elders.

Acts chapter, there are a couple of verses that bear this out. Acts 14, 23. And elders were appointed in every church.

And then again, in Titus chapter 1 and verse 5, Paul tells Titus, this is why I left you in Crete so that you might put what remained in order. Notice that word order.

God expects his church to be orderly. It's not chaos. There has to be a structure of authority within the church.

[6 : 19] And then he goes on to say, and appoint elders in every town. Now, these are the verses that give us the basis for what we call Presbyterianism in the kind of church and the kind of tradition that we belong to.

Now, that doesn't mean that the elder makes up his own rules as he goes along. I don't know if you know what happens at session meetings. But session meetings always have to be in conformity with the Bible.

Very often, sessions talk about mundane things, things that have to be done, and how to put things in order. And I've had the privilege of working with your session for the last year and a half.

And I can tell you that these are very orderly gentlemen. They're not perfect. They wouldn't claim to be perfect. But I'm really impressed by the fact that they are concerned that the right things happen in this congregation.

And I really do mean that. I'm not just trying to flatter them. I have no reason to. But I really do. I am impressed with the fact that these are men who are deeply serious about the ministry of the word and the fruitfulness of the gospel and the witness of this congregation.

[7 : 37] And so, authority is where you recognize your accountability to God and the solemnity that there is in that place.

You know, there was a day when if you got to be an elder in the church, it was a kind of a status symbol in the community. That's not the case at all. Being an elder is not a long service medal.

It's not a recognition of how respectable you are. It's a calling. It's a divine calling. It's a serious business, being an elder.

Now, we also believe in our tradition that there are, and again, we're taking this from the Bible. It's not just tradition. It's from the Bible. That there are two kinds of elders. There are what they call ruling elders.

And most of the session here are ruling elders. And there are teaching elders. And the teaching elder, the other name for the teaching elder, is a minister. Okay? And in this congregation, there will be one minister on Saturday, and he will be the teaching elder.

[8 : 40] Now, he will take his place amongst the other elders, and he will have exactly the same status as them. The minister, by the way, is not a step above the elders.

He's not the CEO. He doesn't call the shots. So, Joe is not going to come first session meeting and say, this is what I want you guys to do.

He has no intention of doing that. And that's not the way it works. It's collective. It's collaborative. It's cohortative. Cohortative. You know what that word means? Cohortative is a sentence that begins with, let's do this.

Let's do this. That's the way that leadership works in the church. It's servant and collective and collaborative and brotherly leadership.

But one which is divided into two types. The ruling elder, of which most elders are, and the one teaching elder. Or, if the congregation has an assistant minister, there are two teaching elders.

[9 : 44] But at the moment, that's not the case here. Okay? So, the teaching elder is what we're looking at here. Because on Saturday, Joe is going to be ordained and inducted as your teaching elder.

And the reason why the presbytery is doing that is because the presbytery represents the collection of congregations in the Edinburgh and sort of northeast area.

It's a big area. The presbytery here stretches from Aberdeen all the way down to London. And there are some of our people who want it split into two presbytery. I think that might be quite a good idea because of the geographical distance that's involved.

But in any case, the presbytery is the collection of churches that we belong to. And they are the sort of, if you like, the wider tier or the higher tier of authority within the church.

So, it's their job to come on Saturday and induct and ordain Joe. Now, let me say one thing because this came up in conversation just today with some of you.

[10 : 51] I think it's important to understand what an ordination is. And some of you will never have seen an ordination. And it's really quite interesting and it's a very special event.

Because Joe is not coming from another congregation, because this is his first charge, he is going to be ordained as well as inducted.

If he was coming from another congregation in, say, Edinburgh, he would only be inducted. Which means that he would be received as minister. But in this case, because he is a young man and this is his first charge, he has to be ordained.

Now, let me just explain what ordination is all about. Because actually, every church practices this practically. It's not just a free church. This is not a free church thing.

This is something that all churches do. When a man goes into, when he's ready to begin ministry, there's a very special event that takes place in which the church sets him aside formally and officially for the work of ministry.

[12 : 08] In other words, what they're saying to him is this. We have recognized, as we believe we've been led by God, to recognize your gifts and your qualities. We believe that you have a calling to ministry and we are now solemnly and formally setting you aside for the purpose of ministering God's word in the church.

That's what ordination is. Now, you find it in the Bible. And the symbolic act that takes place, always that takes place, is this.

That the person, Joe, will kneel on the platform there and his brother ministers will come around him and place their hands on his head.

I'm just telling you this in case you're not expecting it. They will place their hands on his head to symbolically set him aside for the work to which they and we believe that he has been called.

Now, you'll find it in the Bible. 1 Timothy chapter 4 and verse 14. Let me just read it to you because I do think this is really important.

[13 : 29] Where Paul says to Timothy, Do not neglect your gift which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

So, what you're going to see on Saturday is entirely biblical. It's not just something that we've dreamed up. It's not some kind of mysterious action that we take as a church because it's been done.

No, this is because it's in the Bible. It's a solemn setting apart of a man for ministry.

Okay, now that ought to set the scene for what I'm just about to say and for how we're going to go about putting into practice what we have read in this passage.

We are to acknowledge those who work hard among you and who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. We are to hold them in the highest regard and love because of their work.

[14 : 32] Now, how does this work out in practice? Let me just divide this into two. First of all, I want us to think about what we should expect of our new minister or what you should expect of your new minister.

And then I want us to think about what he should expect of you as a congregation. I think that's fairly simple, isn't it? And it's all going to be application. It's all going to be practical.

And I hope that it's going to be helpful as you enter into this new chapter, this new phase in the life of Bon Accord. And I, can I say this?

I hope that you are wholeheartedly behind what the congregation is doing. I hope that you recognize that the mind of the congregation has been made clear.

Some of us, because of our temperament or perhaps because of our expectation, are maybe a little bit more hesitant than others. But I really hope that we can put that to one side.

[15 : 36] And I hope that we can come together in enthusiastically supporting what is about to happen. Because that is what a congregation, that's what the unity of a congregation is all about.

We are to be enthusiastic about the beginning of a new ministry. So let me just begin by asking this question, what you should expect of him?

And the short and simple answer is the ministry of the word. His primary function will be this pulpit. Or perhaps he may want to speak from down there at some time.

I don't know how he's going to work it out. It doesn't matter. But the pulpit is the ministry of the word. You're coming to hear the word from the man that you as a congregation have called.

And he must be diligent in putting all his effort into bringing the word to you. And that involves studying.

[16 : 45] It involves continuing what he's already learned in seminary. It involves spending time in the Bible, praying over it, ruminating over the passage or the book that he's going to bring to you.

Praying over how he's going to deliver his message to you, what he's going to say from Sunday to Sunday. The preaching of the word is his primary function.

So that means that you can expect him to be in this pulpit. Now, that doesn't mean, of course, that he has to be here every week. There are times when, I guess, that he'll want guest preachers here at various times.

And, of course, that's perfectly normal. There are also times when he may feel overwhelmed by it. You may, you may, that he may feel that, that, that he needs a break from time to time.

I know, I've known Joe for the last three years. I know him as a student. And I know that he is a very serious young man, a very able young guy, and one who is heart and soul in what he is about to begin.

[18 : 03] I remember meeting him three years ago when he came into my office and he shared with me his sense of calling to ministry. And I remember being so impressed, so touched by his, by the warmth of his personality and the seriousness of his intentions.

And I say that because I'm conscious that many of you don't know him. And I have every confidence that he has all the makings of a first class and a diligent minister among you.

The second thing that you should expect of your minister is his availability or rather his pastoral care. Remember what I said at the very beginning that the motif that runs all the way through the Bible that there is a picture, a clear picture of what a pastor is, is the shepherd and his flock.

Now, again, we're talking about people skills. And again, I know that Joe has people skills. I've, in my many conversations with him over the years, I've never felt a sense of awkwardness.

He's always, he's always given me that sense that you can have a normal, rational conversation with him and that he is interested in, just as interested in you as you are in him.

[19 : 34] And this is so important for a pastor. It's not just what you are in the pulpit, but it is what you are among people. Because you want someone who you feel comfortable enough to be able to share some personal circumstances with him.

You want to be able to get to know him to such an extent that you're able to share. Some of you have, perhaps I'm sure, that you wrestle with doubts or with a sense of backsliding, a sense of your own weakness, things that you're troubled about.

And you want a pastor that you're able to go to and who's available for you and who understands where you're coming from and who will take a prayerful and a genuine interest in what you are struggling with.

I believe that he has all these qualities and I believe that that is something that we can, that we should expect of him. We expect a good example in terms of his personality.

And again, that should be self-evident of all of us. And by the way, what I say about someone else, I'm saying about every minister, including myself, I'm rebuking myself for all the failures that I have made in the past.

[20 : 56] And then, lastly, his leadership. But again, leadership is not a one-man dictatorship. Leadership is his willingness to work with the other leaders that God has called to be pastors and to be elders over this congregation.

And I believe, I strongly believe that he will be more than willing to work and he'll be willing to listen to the advice and perhaps to the slightly differing perspectives of other session members.

And I know that in my own ministry, both here and in Stornoway, that I've always valued the collective judgment of my brethren because I don't have all the right answers.

I hope I'm never arrogant enough to think that they're all a bunch of idiots and I'm the only one who's got any sense. No minister should think like that.

But we should be ready to receive the other perspectives that our fellow elders bring. That's the great thing about Presbyterianism.

[22 : 07] It's not a one-man show. It's not a dictatorship. It's a collective judgment, the wise, prayerful, brotherly counsel of our fellow elders.

And I valued often that counsel over the years. So that's what we should expect of him. Now what should he expect from you?

First thing is this, your attendance. Your attendance. Now we're coming out of COVID and things are, we hope, although we're not entirely sure how things are going to play out, we hope for some greater normality than we've had over the last 18 months or so, in which we have become rather too accustomed to doing church from our sitting rooms.

And I say that, by the way, I'm saying that from my own experience. I'm on the other side of the fence now. I no longer have a congregation, apart from this one, I just visit here once a month or whatever, but I no longer have a congregation.

I no longer have to be in a pulpit every Sunday. I get to be a member in a congregation called Esk Valley Free Church down in Midlothian, right?

[23 : 30] And our church has had to be closed as well, so our services have had to be live streamed as well. And I've got used to it. I know I'm confessing this, I've got used to it.

There's something really easy about just sitting on the couch with a cup of coffee and listening to the service. So that when things begin to go back to normal, it requires me having to say to myself, waking up Ivor.

You have to get back to normal. You have to go back to church. And because you've been so isolated, I know we've all complained about it, but, well, speaking for myself, we can get used to isolation, not having to speak to other people, not having to meet other people, not having to be surrounded by other people.

Now, listen, please hold on a minute. I'm not talking about people who have underlying health conditions and because of your particular circumstances, you can't come back to church. I'm not talking about people like that.

I'm talking about people who can come back to church and yet that sense of it being all too comfortable to just stay in the house house.

[24 : 55] And the argument that you use is this, and I've used it, the argument you use is this, well, it's still the word, isn't it? You're hearing the word, aren't you? So that's the important thing from one point of view.

Yes, it is the important thing, but church is more than hearing the word. Church is the collective hearing of the word. It's hearing God as a gathered community of believers, as a family.

And if you look through the Bible, that collection is really, really crucial. It's not just me and God, it's us and God.

It's let us sing to the Lord. It's I joyed when to me they said, let us go to the house of the Lord.

So that's what the mantra of Bon Accord should be to one another. Notice how many times in the Bible that worship includes what we say to each other. We're to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to each other as much.

[26 : 01] In other words, there's a sort of outward effect of worship. I know that worship is primarily upwards, but actually worship should flow outwards as well.

So this to be an encouragement to others and draw them in. So let us sing to the Lord. We're encouraging one another. So I'm saying to you tonight, let's get back to church.

Unless you have a good reason, of course you may have a good reason, but I'm putting that aside, let's get back to church. Let's get back to church morning and evening and let's make the most of the opportunity and let this please be the occasion.

Start of a new ministry, new beginning, resolution. What's your resolution going to be? I hope at the very least it's going to be, I'm going to be there in person.

Do you know what it's like being a minister? Let me tell you what it's like being a minister. You walk up into the pulpit. You know what the first thing you look for is? You look for your people. You really do.

[27 : 14] Do you know, have you any idea how encouraging it is for a minister, how uplifting it is to see all of the people there? If you knew you would be there, I can tell you.

Because you see, you think that ministers are kind of invincible. You think that ministers are impervious. They don't have feelings. You're wrong. The pulpit is an incredibly lonely place.

I know I'm bearing my soul to you, but I know you're well enough. The pulpit is an incredibly lonely place and you look for the strength and the support that your people give you just by being there.

And you know that they've made the effort because they want to be there and because they're hungry to hear the word and because the word is going to affect them and because it means everything to them and it gives you all the more encouragement to preach your heart out.

So please be there for him. Well, be there for yourselves in the first instance, but be there for him because it's a two-way thing. And by attendance, I don't just mean being there physically because you know as well as I do, you can be there and be miles away, but be attentive to the word.

[28 : 47] It means coming with expectation. How much? The reason I'm asking you is because I ask myself the same question. Don't think I'm getting at you. I know what human weakness is in myself.

Okay, so you get up on a Sunday morning and you're going to go to church. To what extent do you pray that God will prepare you for coming to church? To what extent do you look forward to going to church?

To what extent do you sort of try and put everything else out of your mind, all the distracting thoughts, everything you've been doing during the week? Do you make a conscious effort and say to yourself, I'm going to think of nothing except the Bible because there's only an hour.

I just need to focus now on the Bible. The problem is that we don't do that and we come to church in a kind of a lazy, a kind of half-hearted manner and we end up getting nothing, not because the preacher's bad, but because we have not come to worship in the right attitude.

I've been there. I know what I'm talking about from my own experience. God's word, Lord, Lord, please make this a new beginning.

[30 : 12] From next Sunday onwards, I'm going to come to church with a new attitude, with a new determination to listen and to receive God's word and to pray that God will speak to me through the word.

And you would be amazed, you will be amazed at what God will do. I don't think there is any service when I don't get anything.

It could only be a sentence, it might only be a word, it might only be a verse of a psalm or a hymn, it might be just something that the minister says in passing, and it changes the way you think and it sends you out with a new realization of what God has done for you.

Isn't that the case? I know there's a range of preaching styles, I made mention of that this morning, there are different types of preachers, and Joe is, he comes from this sort of younger school of preachers that are quieter, more explanatory, more conversational, if you like, that's the way that things are, but it's still the word, and the word speaks with authority, and we can expect the Holy Spirit to be present and to be active in the word, so you will get used to him, and as you do so, pray that God will use him mightily to change you and to change others in the congregation.

Your attentiveness also means your response to him. Don't be ashamed to take what he's been saying and to come to him afterwards and continue the theme.

[32 : 03] There's nothing so encouraging for a minister as when somebody comes to you and wants to continue talking about something that you've raised in the pulpit. don't be afraid to do that with him.

Remember, I said to you before, he's totally approachable. And when he says something that really means something to you, something that resonates with you and that you believe has changed your way, then tell him that.

Encourage him. And when you do that, that'll send him back into the study. He'll wait to get back into the study to say more so that you'll be encouraged more. give him also your friendship, your confidence, your honesty.

Tell him where you are in your life. I still remember honest conversations I've had with people in both congregations I've had the privilege of ministering over who have come to me and we've shared together doubts and fears and things that they're struggling with.

You talk about them. You don't always have the answers for them. You pray with them. You just kind of try and understand. That's what fellowship is all about.

[33 : 26] It's about honesty. It's not about pretense. Let's be honest with one another. There's something honest about these verses.

Look what Paul goes on to say in verse 14. We urge you, brothers and sisters. Warn those who are idle and disruptive. Encourage the disheartened. That all speaks of a relationship within the church that goes more than how are you doing?

I'm fine. How are you? It speaks of relationships in which you don't need to be afraid of one another. You don't need to be afraid of your minister and what he might think of you because what you see is what you get and you're able to share with him the things that you're wrestling with.

That's how the church should operate. Let's not be hard hearted, unemotional Scots refusing to bear our soul with anyone, refusing to let anybody in.

That's not the way it's supposed to be. The church is the family of God where we can be ourselves and where we feel we can be honest with one another and receive a prayerful and a genuinely caring response.

[34 : 56] And of course you know where I'm going to end, don't you? I'm going to end with prayer. Many, many more things I could say. I was going to talk about your commitment. Your commitment will mean the world to Joe as he begins his new ministry.

Your friendship to Joe and Susie and their family, God willing, when they have the baby that they're expecting, I'm sure that that will be a source of real joy in the congregation just like it is with the families that you have already in the congregation.

Your commitment to Sunday school and to youth work and to the senior citizens and to everything else that is going on. One of the hardest things a minister has to contend with is just that there's the sheer lack of volunteers that there are.

Please change that. Let's change that. Ask yourself, what can I do for this church to support my brothers and sisters and those who are working hard in the Lord.

Do you notice that? That's how Paul describes elders and ministers, those who work hard among you. That's the key element in working in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[36 : 14] It's not always because we feel like it. It's because we tell us that this is where God has called me and this is the command I have from the Lord Jesus Christ to serve him diligently no matter what it costs.

So let me say lastly that your new minister deserves your prayer, your constant daily prayer. Do you know why? Because he is a human being and because he's a young man, because he is not perfect, he is a sinner, subject to all kinds of temptation and weakness just like you, except he is in the position where the devil says if I get him, I get his ministry.

That's how vulnerable a minister is. That's the stakes. And that's why you need to pray for him, that God will protect him and keep him and strengthen him and develop him as a man who he has brought amongst you.

May the Lord bless this new chapter. I really am so thrilled for you and will be remembering you and praying that we'll be hearing how things are going, how you're getting on together, together, and praying that the Lord will continue to speak to people and change people through the word and through the fellowship of this congregation.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we ask now that as we commit ourselves to you and as we commit this congregation to you, and as we commit Joe and Susie to you, we ask, Father, that they may be every day assured of your calling, that you have brought them here, and that you will continue to lead and guide as you have done up until this moment.

[38 : 35] Father in heaven, we pray we're all so vulnerable, and we're all so weak and sinful. We confess our sin before you again today, and we ask that you will not only forgive us, but that you will strengthen us and give us that sense of determination to continue in the strength that you give.

So, Father in heaven, we don't know what lies ahead, but we do know that you have not left us, and that you have a purpose in where we are right now, and we ask that whatever that is, that we will not be a hindrance, but that rather we will take our place in bringing about that great plan in your hand.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.