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**Presentation Transcript**  
**Elements of a Biblically-Based Congregation – Part 3**  
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We're continuing our series, *Elements of a Biblically-Based Congregation*. This is the third and final part of the series. The topic today is the purpose of a biblically-based Church of God congregation.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:17 through 19:

**Matthew 7:17-19** – *So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Since we're talking, in this series, about congregational longevity, Jesus tells us, "To last as a congregation, that congregation must bear good fruit." So, what is the fruit of a congregation? And how do we contribute to its growth? Well, we're going to talk about congregational fruit today. There are two kinds. One is the spiritual growth of the members. That's one of the fruits of a congregation. In Ephesians 4:12, Paul said that the purpose of the church was to *equip the saints for the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ*. And then the second purpose is congregational growth. Jesus told the disciples to make disciples. In our context today, that could cause the congregation to get larger. So let's look at the one we're most familiar with first of all – the spiritual growth of the congregational members.

Going back to Ephesians 4:12, he said the purpose of the church was:

**Ephesians 4:12-16** – *...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ - so the church equips us to do God's work – until – verse 13 – we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ....* So it makes us more Christlike – being in the church – and we grow in unity of faith and understanding and how to act like Christ in every situation. Then he says in verse 14: *...so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*

So, we begin as gullible, but as in the church we encounter those who walk by the *sarx* – that’s the Greek word for what’s translated *the flesh* in the New Testament – *who walk by the flesh*, deceptive and clever. It’s not really about your body. It’s about the human mind and its deceptive cleverness. This exposure helps us to read the intentions of others so we’re not deceived by them. Paul said that spiritual maturity is the ability to tell good from evil. So, he’s put bad examples for us in the church and also good ones. And we learn to exercise the fruits of the Spirit following the good examples we encounter. Then he says in verse 15: *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ* – sometimes, speaking the truth can be hard, but, if we do it love, then it won’t be as difficult to receive – and *we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped* – we’re the joints – *when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

So, do you see the picture? If we get it going the right way in a congregation, it starts to build up speed, until it becomes exponential growth that is produced – more people, all of them interacting with each other in a helpful way. So, in this case, it helps the members become what God wants them to be to fulfill their destiny – to live now by the rules of the Kingdom of God. Not when we get there, but to live by those rules now, though it’s not fully here yet. So, God’s Kingdom is about relationship. That’s why we have a church, so we have people to relate to. Our life in the church, where we live by the rules and practice of the Kingdom, is practice for eternal life.

I was talking to a fellow minister about a member in his congregation that we both know and love. And he mentioned that our mutual friend has a problem getting along with other people, which I also knew. That’s a shame, because he has so much to offer. And that’s what we were lamenting. But then he said, “But the others are figuring him out and they’re beginning to just ignore his weakness.” So, they’re being strengthened by learning to accept his weakness and work around it. I fully expect, as our friend can rub shoulders with the other members, he will figure some things out from that and he will grow too.

Also, there are two kinds of serving – our ministry. In talking to a minister of a large mega-church, I learned that people are given to one of the two great purposes of the church. Some are ministers... their skill lends them toward member growth – evangelism, in other words. Others have a different skill set that is more oriented toward helping the people that are in the congregation to grow spiritually. Sometimes that has to do with the spiritual gifts God has given. We can read about that in 1 Corinthians 12:5:

**1 Corinthians 12:5** – *...and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord.*

So, what kind of minister do you think the apostle Paul was? Well, he was sent to the Gentiles, right? He was an evangelist. He was an evangelistic type. You read some of the talks he gave –

some of the reasoning he used when he was arrested by the Roman authorities – how Felix said Paul’s talk almost made him want to be a Christian.

So, let’s think about the apostle John for a minute. What kind of skill set did he have? He didn’t have any spiritual skills in the beginning. He was called a Son of Thunder, right? But he learned, from being around Jesus, to be the apostle of love. He wrote three books that are all about that. They’ve been cited many times in English literature as the greatest exposition of human love that can be given.

So, Paul said some pretty nurturing things, however, even though he was an evangelist. And John wrote four books of the Bible with the *people must know* thing in his mind. It wasn’t that they were devoid of one and had only the other trait, but were stronger in one than the other. And the point of all that for us is, that were all responsible for both of these things – both church growth and church development – but we will usually be better at one than the other. So, that’s something to keep in mind.

There’s a term in the New Testament: *elder*. The word means overseer, kind of like a shepherd. He watches over the sheep. Why? Well, to keep them safe – he protects them – and to keep them from getting lost – he finds them when they’re losing their way – and he helps them grow. That’s why he’s keeping them safe and from getting lost – so that they can grow fat. Now, he does not have to be a fiery tongued evangelist, but instead a teacher, an encourager, a motivator, a challenger, a care-giver, an example. And everybody in a congregation is supposed to contribute to that, especially in the face of new people and children.

Let’s think about another aspect of this congregational nurturing. Have you ever gotten lazy with going to church? You know, had a hard week at work, and you talk yourself into staying home to rest? Or, maybe you think no one cares if you show up or not, so you’re going doesn’t make a difference, so why go? Riding Job’s horse a bit, maybe. Well, in a Spirit-led congregation, the Spirit-led members are led to go to church, unless there’s a real reason not to, like being sick. If we have a church to go to, and we don’t go, we’re walking by the flesh, not living by the Spirit. We’re using human reason instead of inviting God and Christ in us to direct our lives. So, how can we do our job at church if we’re not there? Think about that. God said He gave everybody some skills to use so they can help do their job at church. If you’re not *at* church, how can you do that? So, going to church is not about how *we* feel, it’s about how we can make *others* feel, even with just a smile or a kind word. But to do that, we have to *be* there. Our face won’t break if we smile at somebody that we don’t yet know, even if we’re in a bad attitude. We’re not commanded by God to go to church and tell everybody all our problems. So, having a hard week or a bad attitude is not an excuse. But we *are* told that we should be present with or spiritual siblings, because we are good for them and they’re good for us. Go looking for someone once you get there to interact with, to help, to shake hands with, to smile at. And again, why are we doing this? God is using each one of us to help Him to sanctify – to perfect – the members of our congregation.

My friend, Guy Swenson, asked the question, “Is the congregation supposed to be a hospital for sinners or a spa for the saints?” Well, some people just don’t understand that the whole point of the congregation is to help people grow spiritually. That implies that they need to. So, nobody’s perfect. There’s no congregation full of people who always walk by the Spirit. So, we don’t have any room to judge anybody else.

Let’s look at a congregation’s other job – that is, growing the congregation. Most of us come from a background of letting others do our evangelism for us over media. We send them money and they spread the word. Did Jesus do that? No, He couldn’t. There wasn’t media. I guess getting into a boat, and moving away from the shore was about as good as they had because it could make a voice carry.

Media can be a really good way to evangelize, but it is not necessary. A healthy congregation is what draws people to us. And a healthy congregation is full of people who know how God has blessed them and know when to share that with others. A healthy congregation are people who interact with the surrounding community. A healthy congregation is focused on congregational growth. A healthy congregation is focused on spiritual growth. So, let’s see someone directed by the Spirit to do something evangelical. It’s in Acts 8:26:

**Acts 8:26-36** – *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip....* Who’s Philip? Well, he is an apostle. He was one of Jesus’ twelve that He chose to work with Him. And this angel said to Philip: “*Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.*” So he must have been in Jerusalem. Walking down to Gaza is not an easy or quick trip. And it even mentions: *This is a desert place.* And it says: *He arose and went.* He did as he was told. *And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure.* So, he was probably a wealthy man himself and he a man of high responsibility and trusted. *He had come to Jerusalem – we’re told – to worship.* He must have been an Ethiopian Jew. There are such things, you know. There are many people in Ethiopia that consider themselves Jewish. *...and he was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.* So, he might have been a Jew himself. *And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join his chariot.”* So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “*Do you understand what you are reading?*” Now, Philip was an apostle – somebody who is supposed to be good at evangelism. Was that why the angel told him to go to the Ethiopian – because he was gifted with it? He seemed to know the exact question to ask to engage the man in a Bible discussion. And the eunuch said, “*How can I, unless someone guides me?*” So, that was kind of a loaded question he asked him. He knew he didn’t know. And *he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.* Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: “*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.*” And the eunuch said to Philip, “*About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?*” Then Philip opened his mouth, and *beginning with this Scripture* – right where the guy’s question was, right at the tip of the spear –

*and he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"* Maybe the angel knew more about Philip than Philip did and he nudged him into his gift. Or, maybe he told him to go to this man because he didn't know he was there. That seems likely. But to me, it sounds somewhat like Mary's comment to the servants when they ran out of wine at the wedding. Jesus had said to her, "What does this have to do with Me?" And she just looked at the servants and said, "Do whatever He tells you." So, what she told the servants was really as much for Him as it was for them. She was nudging him into His gift. Now, I know that disturbs some people, because they have an idea Jesus wasn't a human being. But He *was*.

Now, the next concept that I want to talk about, when it has to do with evangelism for the church and for each of us, I call it *one at a time*. You don't have to be ordained to add this to a congregation. How did Jesus do it? He did it. He set an example in this. He talked to His disciples as a group. But first He talked to them one at a time. He didn't have a TV program. So, He engaged these people one at a time and then they started to follow Him and learn of His ways.

Now, there was a woman in one of my congregations years ago who had suffered a number of physical ailments. So, she suffered a lot of pain and felt bad a lot of the time – one of the most steady in church attendance however. She also suffered from severe anxiety at times from things that had happened to her in the past. And she didn't have a lot of money. And she lived out of town – had to travel to get to our church. She also lived a long way from her family. They were in a completely different state. Yet somehow, in spite of these limitations, a slow but steady stream of new people appeared at our services. When I would greet them, she was usually there to introduce them to me. She had invited them to services, and for reason or another, they had come. I was also called once by one of her nieces, who lived several states away, which is interesting. Now, I noticed that she had a way of connecting her life experiences with God, and then being able to tell a story about how God worked in her life. That's what encouraged people. She was also good at asking the right questions, like Philip was. So, it's not about paying someone else to do a TV show so you can do your part in evangelism. It's about being able to connect our story with God to the situation other people are in.

Now, each one of us is *not* God. He's responsible for everybody. We are not. We're only responsible for the people that He brings into our lives. And all we have to do to help those we know, and the ones God sends to us, is to help them one at a time. All we have to do is walk in the Spirit, and carry with us that outward looking interest and curiosity in others.

I heard Jordan Peterson say something really interesting. I think I mentioned this in this series earlier, but it's just so good I can't let it go just one time. He said that modern psychology has proven that thinking about yourself and misery are the same thing. So, we have to be outward looking beyond our own problems, which we all have. So, we're all supposed to look after and care for other people, in spite of our own difficulties. And that's what binds a congregation together, because the Spirit is working in that kind of environment. That togetherness, warmth,

closeness, support is what draws the ones God is calling into a congregation. So, it turns out that everyone is an evangelist in this way.

The most common reason a congregation dies – that has to do with congregational longevity, doesn't it? – is that they fail to retain their children. So, in this discussion of congregational longevity, we also have to talk about taking care of kids. And, if we're that warm, unified, aware, inclusive congregation, the chances go up that children will feel a part of it, rather than feeling outsiders. And, if we set a good example for them, that will bolster their faith in God.

I heard of a congregation that would, every month or so, have story night. Not everybody, but some of the members would gather together and practice telling their stories to each other. That was a really great way to get to know one another. And the kids were invited to do this and participate as they were ready.

Can you think of other ways to include the children in the real work of the church? They learn that when we talk, in a humble way about our own weaknesses and how God steps in to help rescue us, the people that God is calling can connect to that. If He's calling them, they're usually in a pretty bad state when that happens.

So, in Philip's case, for example, he answers the Ethiopian's question not with his own story, but with the story of Jesus' life and death, and what it meant for all of us. That was because that was the question the eunuch asked. When somebody asks *you*, "How can you be so positive when all this is happening?" that's the question that has to do with *your* life and what's happened to you. Do you have a story that explains how you can be positive in a negative world? These stories have always been important, but they're more important now than ever. There are more non-Christians than Christians in our country. And most of the non-Christians are younger than most of us here. They have *never* gone to church. They don't know why they would, and they have no idea about how to get started, even if they wanted to.

Have you ever seen those pictures of Hindu celebrations in India – the idols, the bright colors, the costumes, their rituals, the prayers? How would you take a first step toward that, if you wanted to become a Hindu? What would you do? Well, that's the same kind of bewilderment that's felt by most of the young people in our nation toward Christianity. They don't know anything about it. And it makes no sense to start with a practice or a doctrine with most of them, because they don't know anything about any of that. The only exception would be unless their questions are about those things. But explaining how God loves and helps and supports in a world that is increasingly isolating – something that they feel strongly – well, that can help those whom God is calling. Inviting them into a warm and friendly congregation, and then shepherding them through the experience – not leaving them on their own to sink or swim.... I mean, what if they run into the crabby deacon? No, we don't have those, do we? So, we have to shepherd them through the experience that can make a difference for them.

Now, I'm going to take a bit of a risk here. We're changing to another area. I hope you're ready for this, because it *big* – it's mind-expanding – way past most of us when we're just getting started. Jesus told His disciples to go and make more disciples. Well, I think we can all grasp that one. If your job, as a disciple, is to make more disciples, what's the job of the group – the congregation? Well, you know, Jesus used the biology of the plant kingdom to explain the Kingdom of God. Your bad branches that don't bear fruit are cut off the tree. Or, if a tree doesn't bear fruit, it's cut down. Or, the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. So, bearing that in mind, let me ask you, "What is the job of an apple tree?" Well, you could say, "To make fruit – to make apples." Yeah, that *is* true, but what is an apple? Well, an apple get picked up by people and is carried and seeds get spread all over the place. What do the seeds produce eventually? Not all of them, but what are they for? Well, a seed is make more apple trees. So, what is the job of a congregation? Well, it's to make more congregations. The fruit of a congregation is congregations, not apples and not seeds. They're there to produce more apple trees. Of course, congregations are made up of people, and the people are the seeds, so it's hard to think about that when you're just starting up. But, if we as members make more disciples, won't there be a need for more congregations?

How did *this* congregation get started that you're in – a new congregation? Well, I think everyone here came out of another congregation – some in a happy way and some in a sad way. But more and more, we see people, who feel isolated at home, coming to the Feast, or Winter Family Weekend, or to other congregations, and then going home inspired to get together a new group. They can think of people who have been alienated or who have no where to go. So, those are all possibles. So, the seeds are all blowing around in the winds of the independent churches of God and taking root.

Let me give you a real-world example outside the church – just so that you don't think I'm just talking a lot of bologna. If you look at the Adventist Church today – and they have some of the same, what we would think of as, limitations. They keep the Sabbath, just like we do. So, we can't blame a lack of church growth on them if they grow, can we? Can't blame it on the Sabbath. But, if you look at the Adventist Church today, you can see two churches in one. One church is a big old stone building in the center of town that has a paid pastor. And every Sabbath the pews are filled with elderly people who feel comfortable there. But it keeps getting smaller and smaller, as the membership dies off. But there's also another Adventist Church that is comprised of small groups that meet in homes, much like the original church did, and they have no paid pastor. When these groups become too large to fit into a home for services, they make a plan and they divide. So, now, what used to be one, is two. And, while the big church is growing smaller, the house Adventist group is growing rapidly.

I learned something really interesting from them. I was told, when I was first came into what we could call *the church*, not to preach to others. I would just mess it up. I didn't know what I was talking about. Let the minister do that. Well, in the small Adventist group church, they realize

that, when a new person comes to church, they bring with them, in their hearts, a circle of friends, whom no one in the congregation knows yet. But they are all potential members.

One example I read about was a house church that gained a new member who was from Jamaica. After he became integrated into the congregation, they planned a social based on a Jamaican theme with Jamaican food, Jamaican music, Jamaican clothing, and they had Jamaica night! Of course, the Jamaican member provided all of his Jamaican friends to it. His friends came and encountered a warm, friendly, happy group, who were obviously close and who loved each other, and who seemed to draw them in. It was an inviting experience for people who have moved to a new land and had to struggle with cultural integration. Think about how that works. No money needed. No paid ministry needed. Maybe some good cooks – that’s what they needed. What they needed was people intent on producing fruit as they walk in accordance with Spirit.

We can do that. We have to change to do it. If we think about all that we’ve talked about today – a lot of it might be new – but it’s really not new. It’s all been practiced in the New Testament church. And it’s being practiced in other Christian groups. It’s being practiced in the world today. Do you know that in China – where being a Christian could mean life in prison – there is a Christian group meeting in secret in people’s homes on the Sabbath? And they’re growing so much that they are exporting their literature – yes, they have their *own* literature – they’re exporting it to Chinese people in the United States and other nations. If it works for them, do you think it could work for us? Well, my answer to that question is, “Only if we are intentional about it.” I mean, how much of the budget would we allocate? Would we hear sermons about it? Are there work groups working on our presentation? Are the spiritual gifts of the congregation being groomed and marshalled for the effort? What are we doing to learn how to tell a good story, for example? What’s the proof of what we say we want to do? Well, the proof is in intentional effort. Do we have that? That’s the question.

Okay, this completes our series, *Elements of a Biblically-Based Congregation*. My thought originally was to speak to a start-up congregation in the independent Church of God. And there are, obviously, many other things we could have discussed. My thought was to focus on what we as Christians can do to get right from the beginning. So, if you’re starting up, what things do you need to think about first – not that we’re going to do all things on our own, but inviting God the Father and Jesus Christ into our thinking to guide us.