

The Anatomy of a Church, Part 4

The Internal Systems – C

Introduction

I was interviewed by the editor of Discipleship magazine, which is published by the Navigators, and he asked me what my desire for the church is. I told him, "My desire is that it would be what Christ designed it to be." The elders, staff, and congregation of Grace Church all share that desire. That's why it's important for a church to continually reaffirm the basic things that it should be committed to.

A. The Church's Failure Discussed

A few years ago, when I taught a class on ecclesiology at Talbot Theological Seminary, I had my students read Michael Griffith's book ***God's Forgetful Pilgrims*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1978). In it he said, Christians collectively seem to be suffering from a strange amnesia. A high proportion of people who 'go to church' have forgotten what it is all for. Week by week they attend services in a special building and go through their particular, time-honored routine, but give little thought to the purpose of what they are doing.

The Bible talks about 'the bride of Christ' but the church today seems like a ragged Cinderella, hideous among the ashes. She has forgotten that she is supposed to be growing up, as the soap advertisements used to have it, 'to be a beautiful lady'!

He's right. The church (especially here in America), which is supposed to be the bride of Christ, is a ragged Cinderella. It needs to reaffirm the nonnegotiable, essential elements that God designed for it to be committed to. That's the intent of this study on "The Anatomy of a Church": to study the basic principles that a church should be committed to.

B. The Church's Focus Distorted

We have to make sure that the church doesn't get committed to the wrong principles. Gene Getz, in his book ***"The Measure of a Church"*** (Glendale, CA.: G/L Pub. , 1975), said that happens frequently. He wrote, Some say a mature church is an active church! They evaluate progress by the number of meetings held each week and by the number of different kinds of programs going on.

Some say a mature church is a growing church! As long as new people are coming and staying, they believe they are a maturing church. As long as the pastoral staff is enlarging, they believe 'all is well.'

Some say a mature church is a giving church! As long as people are contributing financially to the ongoing program of the church and supporting its many ventures, they believe it is a maturing church.

Some say a mature church is a soul-winning church! They say this is proof positive. When people are bringing others to Christ regularly, when we can account for regular professions of faith and regular baptisms, then for sure we have a New Testament church.

Some say a mature church is a missionary-minded church--a church that supports missions around the world, designating a large percentage of its overall budget to world evangelism.

Some say a mature church is a smooth-running church--a church whose organizational machinery is oiled with every degree of regularity. It is a finely tuned machine with job descriptions, eight-hour days, coffee breaks and punch cards. Everybody does what he was hired to do--on time and efficiently.

Still others say a mature church is a "Spirit-filled" church. This is the church that is enthusiastic and dynamic. It has lots of emotion and excitement. Everyone in it knows what his gifts are and uses them regularly.

And finally, some say the ultimate mark of maturity is the big church, with thousands coming to Sunday School and church every Sunday. Maturity, to them, is represented by a large paid staff, scores of buses

that pick up children every week, multiple programs, a radio and television ministry, a Christian day school, a Christian college and seminary; and oh, yes, a printing press to prepare its own literature. Unfortunately, some people really believe that what I have stated are actually biblical marks of maturity.

There's nothing wrong with active, growing, giving, soul-winning, missionary-minded, smooth running, big churches. But a cult can have all of those characteristics, too (They wouldn't be Spirit filled, though.) None of those things are the heart of the church. That's why we have to look behind the external things of a church and look into its anatomy. We need to know the internal elements of the church. Sometimes pastors visit Grace Church and want to copy the external things that they see going on. But we tell them it's the internal things that are more important. We're supposed to focus on attitudes, not activities.

Review

We have already studied the nonnegotiable, foundational form of the church:

I. THE SKELETON

The skeleton is comprised of...

- A. A High View of God**
- B. The Absolute Authority of Scripture**
- C. Sound Doctrine**
- D. Personal Holiness**
- E. Spiritual Authority**

A church also has to have. . .

II. THE INTERNAL SYSTEMS

A body has to have things within it that give it life. The church must also have the same. The people of a church must have certain attitudes. A church can't just have external routines. God would despise that.

God chastised the people of Israel when their religion became mere external routine. Through the prophet Amos, He said, *"I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not take delight in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meal offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thine harps. But let justice run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream"* (Am. 5:21-24).

Through Hosea, God said, *"...O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? For your goodness is like a morning cloud, and like the early dew it goeth away. Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth; and thy judgments are as the light that goeth forth. For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings"* (Hos. 6:4-6). God told the people of Israel, *"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me? saith the LORD; I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts, and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats. When ye come to appear before Me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread My courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto Me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot bear; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hateth; they are a trouble unto Me; I am weary of bearing them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide Mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear..."* (Isa. 1:11-15a). The people of Israel were guilty of external religiosity--they didn't have the right internal attitudes.

I believe that the heart and soul of a ministry should be to lay a skeletal foundation and then spend time trying to create right heart attitudes in people. That's what makes the church a beautiful lady; that's what builds the church up to the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ.

We've already looked at several of the internal attitudes that should be present in a church:

- A. Obedience**
- B. Humility**
- C. Love**
- D. Unity**

E. Willingness to Serve

F. Joy

G. Peace

H. Thankfulness

The ninth attitude I'd like to look at is. . .

I. Self-Discipline

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

As Christians, we need to realize how important it is for us to conform to God's divine standard. Self-discipline means staying away from sin and doing only those things that are right. That's a simple, clear definition of self-discipline. The disciplined person understands the law of God and doesn't do anything outside the bounds of that standard.

a. *In Competition*

1) *The Requirement*

Paul talks about self-discipline in 1 Corinthians 9:24- 27. There, he uses a metaphor that is familiar to all of us to illustrate his point: a race. Beginning in verse 24, he says, "*Know ye not that they who run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.*" Everyone in a race runs to win the prize; that's why they're in the race. As believers, we have been called to race (Gal. 5:7; Phil. 2:16; Heb. 12:1-2). We are to run to win. What is necessary to accomplish that goal? Paul tells us in verse 25: "*And every man that striveth for the mastery [competes in athletics] is temperate in all things...*" In other words, if a person wants to experience victory, he has to be self-disciplined. A man can't win a race if he is thirty pounds overweight. Tremendous discipline is required to keep in shape.

The number of hours an athlete must train so that he can win in competition is staggering. An athlete who competes internationally frequently trains several hours a day for as long as five to ten years of his life. He must push himself to the point where he will not experience pain, to a point beyond a second wind. There is a euphoria beyond pain that only athletes can experience. I've been involved in athletics enough to have experienced that myself. That euphoria is like an incredible sense of freedom and energy, and it only comes beyond pain. It's hard to explain.

2) The Rules

Paul told the Corinthians, "I'm running in a spiritual race. In order to win, I've got to get myself under control." That's what he said in verse 26, "*I, therefore, so run, not as uncertainly...*" In other words, he's saying that he makes sure he stays on course. In 2 Timothy 2:5, Paul told Timothy that for an athlete to win the crown in a race, he must "*strive lawfully* [Gk. *nominos*]. " He must obey the rules of the game. He can't go out of bounds. If he wants to win, he must conform to the rules. That's what Paul is telling the Corinthians: "I want to win, so I must give my best effort." The Greek verb used for "*striveth for the mastery*" in 1 Corinthians 9:25 speaks of self-discipline, which includes the idea of staying within the rules.

In verse 27, Paul added, "*...I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway [i. e., `be disqualified because of sin'].*" He didn't want to sin and lose the chance for a spiritual victory any more than an athlete would want to do anything that would cause him to lose a physical victory.

b. *In Combat*

1) *The Specifics About the Battle*

I once had the opportunity to teach a Bible study for the Miami Dolphins football team before a game they had against the Los Angeles Raiders. I taught to them from Ephesians 6. Some of them already had their legs and ankles taped, ready for battle. I told them that they had spent a tremendous number of hours and much energy to reach the peak of athletic performance that they were at. Soon, they were going to put on their armor, so to speak, to do battle for a corruptible crown (1 Cor. 9:25). I told them that there was another warfare more important than that: the spiritual warfare for an incorruptible crown--an eternal inheritance that *"fadeth not away"* (1 Pet. 1:4). For that kind of warfare, there is an armor more important than shoulder pads, chest pads, hip pads, helmets, and all the other things football players wear. It is vital to wear that armor if one is going to know victory in spiritual warfare. I shared with them Ephesians 6:11: *"Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."* Then I said, "Fighting unprepared against the enemies of your soul would be like fighting the Raiders in your gym shorts. *'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places'* (Eph. 6:12)." We are in a battle, and the battle isn't against other men. Men are only the playthings of the unseen demonic world. The real battle is against demons.

* ***Experiencing the Battle Against Demonic Forces***

I will never forget a battle with a demon-possessed girl one night at church. She was in one of the rooms of the church kicking, screaming, and throwing furniture around. When I walked into the room that she was in, she said, "Don't let him in!" But the voice that said that wasn't her own. At first that was frightening, and my human response was, "Fine! I'm leaving!" But I began to realize that if the demons didn't like me, then I was on God's team fighting against them. In the power of God, several of us spent hours there until she confessed her sin. God, in his grace, purified her. Since that encounter, I've never doubted that man's battle is against demons. It's a spiritual battle where men are pawns in the hands of demons.

It's important for us to understand the seriousness of the spiritual warfare wrought against Christ and all who belong to Him. We need to put on *"the whole armor of God, that ye may be able... to stand"* (Eph. 6:13). We have to be prepared for battle.

2) *The Supplies for the Battle*

There are two elements of that armor I'd like to emphasize. They are mentioned in Ephesians 6:14:

a) *The Belt of Truth*

Paul tells us to *"stand, therefore, having your loins girded about with truth..."* There, Paul envisions a Roman soldier preparing for battle. If a Roman soldier were to go into battle without a belt, his tunic would fly loosely around him. In hand-to-hand combat, a loose tunic could interfere with a soldier's moves and cause his death. It also made him vulnerable to being grabbed by an enemy soldier. To prevent that from happening, a Roman soldier put on a belt to gather his tunic tightly around him. Paul called it the belt of truthfulness. He associated it with a sincere commitment to self-discipline. We must be serious about being prepared for spiritual battle. The battle we are in is not trivial. We need to be committed to walking the narrow path that God has called us to walk. That isn't easy; there are little voices all along that path calling us to divert from it. If we love pleasure more than we love God, then we'll divert from the path of self-discipline that God has called us to and enter into sin. The Apostle Paul warned that we must be serious about the war we are in and tighten our belts in an act of real commitment to victory.

b) *The Breastplate of Righteousness*

Roman soldiers wore a breastplate over their chests to keep their vital organs from being vulnerable to arrows and knives. Paul called it the breastplate of righteousness (or holiness). We need to live righteous lives--to obey God's laws--or we'll be vulnerable in battle. If we're going to win the race we're in, we've got to discipline ourselves to live pure lives in obedience to God's will. In 2 Corinthians 7:1, Paul says, *"Having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."* Because we are the sons and daughters of God (2 Cor. 6:18), we've got to be serious about being self-disciplined and living righteously. We need to put on our belts and breastplates and run the race to win it. We're to run that race wholeheartedly, and stay within the limits of the rules.

2. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

I grieve when I see undisciplined Christians. They're aware of the fact that they're to be obedient, but they're not committed to that command. In Philippians 4:8, Paul commands us, *"Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."* Self-discipline is related to our minds. Proverbs 23:7 says, *"For as [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he..."* A pure, self-disciplined life comes from being saturated with the Word of God. The reason it's important to be taught the Word of God is so that when you become tempted to sin, the Spirit of God can help you remember God's Word in your mind. Reading and meditating on the Scripture is necessary to make the Word reside in your heart. The psalmist said *"Thy word have I hidden in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee"* (Psa. 119:11). Your thinking must be controlled with the Word of God. Colossians 3:16 says to *"let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."* God's Word is the source of discipline, and you must be committed to knowing it.

3. THE INDIFFERENCE TO SELF-DISCIPLINE

I'm concerned about the fact that many Christians today are not self-disciplined. Although God's standards have not changed since He first established them, Christians have widened the narrow path they are called to walk and become tolerant of things that are wrong.

a. **Exemplified by Adolescents**

The pastor of the junior-high school department at our church once shared with me some astounding things. He did a survey at a camp for junior-high school kids, and found out that forty-five kids out of fifty-four had already seen an R-rated movie. Out of thirty-five seventh-grade boys, twenty-five had already seen R-rated movies, and twenty-six had read pornographic magazines. Twenty-four of those seventh graders also went to Christian schools! Many of them watch cable television programs that are filthy.

I was distressed to hear that. A seventh-grade child can't be exposed to an R-rated movie without it having a negative effect on him. He isn't going to easily forget eighteen-foot high images of naked people. Junior-high school kids can't handle that. If you allow your junior-high-age kids to go to an R-rated movie, then you're contributing to any sinful responses they have to the movie and allowing them to be exposed to things they can't handle. If you allow your children to watch filthy things on cable television, then don't be shocked if someday they don't have any interest in God.

It grieves my heart to know that adolescents are being exposed to such things. That doesn't help a teenager who is struggling to learn his identity and develop proper sexual ideas. I'm not being legalistic when I say that; I'm concerned about teenagers being exposed to sin. There is nothing worse for the world to do than to display filth before young eyes.

b. **Exemplified by Adults**

1) *Parental Responsibility*

Those of you who are parents need to set an example before your kids. Don't think that your children can handle R-rated movies if you go along with them. You are to be good

stewards of the children God has given you. If you allow your children to be exposed to things they shouldn't see, then you're going to be accountable for that. You should know what your children are doing in their lives.

You say, "I can't help it if my child sees R-rated movies and looks at pornographic magazines," or "There's nothing wrong with going to a movie that has profanity if it's a 'good' movie." Saying that only lowers God's standard. The same thing has happened with music. The things going on with music today have attacked God's standards to the point where our commitment to purity is broken down. We must be cautious of being subliminally induced to lower the standards God has given us.

2) *Personal Responsibility*

If you went to an R-rated movie, you'd contribute to your own sinfulness. Some people say such movies are art, but they're just garbage. Those who promote R-rated movies say that they have some social value, and that they comment on our culture. That's how they attract good, moral people to see them. But those kinds of movies only devastate the level of people's thoughts. There's no place in a Christian's life for the profanity in PG-rated movies and the nudity in R-rated movies. Don't be victimized by the advertising techniques used to lure you to such movies. I feel strongly in my heart that a person who looks at massive, incessant images of garbage or looks through pornographic magazines can't expect himself to cultivate godly thinking.

I don't allow myself to be exposed to worldly things because I want to have God's perspective on things, not the world's. That requires being isolated from worldly things. You say, "If you isolate yourself like that, then you won't know what's going on." That doesn't bother me. I've never been to an R-rated movie and don't intend to go to one. I'm not interested in PG-movies that will expose my mind to the garbage of the world.

Beloved, we live in a time when disciplined living is important. Don't give in to the cries of the world that say, "Come over here; we'll give you pleasure." If you involve yourself in filthy movies or sinful activities, then you have not yet given your life fully to the commitment that God calls for. You've abandoned the path of obedience. We are not to say to ourselves, "Oh, doing that won't be so bad." Paul commands us in Philippians 4:8 to think about things that are good, not things that don't seem bad.

Next, the people of a church should have an attitude of...

J. Accountability

1. THE PRINCIPLE

It is essential to teach everybody in a church that they be accountable to one another. We should be concerned about each other, not what color the carpeting and wallpaper is. People are more important than programs. Let me share with you an example of accountability from Matthew 7: "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (v. 3). In other words, "Why are you more concerned about the little problem in your brother's life than the bigger problem you have in your own life?" Verse 4 continues, "Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?" Matthew uses a hyperbole here; he's making an exaggerated illustration. But his point is clear: How can you help your brother with his little problem when your own life has a bigger problem?

The principle in those verses is this: We have a responsibility to each other to take care of those things that are in each other's eyes. We have a responsibility to deal with sin in each other, but before we can do that, we must deal with our own sin (v. 5). Accountability among the people of a church is an important thing. In a relationship of accountability, a person is not just responsible for taking care of others; he is also responsible for making sure his own life is right before he tries to take care of others.

2. THE PRACTICE

Let's look at a practical application of accountability. Suppose someone that you know at your church stopped coming. It is your responsibility to go to that person and say, "You're forsaking the assembly (Heb. 10:25). You need to be more committed to fellowshiping with God's people." You say, "Who am I to say that? I've got problems in my own life." Then clean up your life--get the beam out of your eye--so that you can confront that other person's sin. Accountability requires us to be pure. If I become concerned about another person's sin, then I have to become concerned about my own sin, too, or I won't be able to deal with that other person.

Galatians 6:1 says, "*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye who are spiritual restore such an one...*" It takes a person walking in obedience to help a person that is living in disobedience. Before a person can help someone who is being disobedient, he must have his own life right. Having everyone in a church be accountable to one another has a self-purifying effect on everyone. A church where people are not taught to care about each other will be a church where people are not challenged to cleanse sin from their own lives. Accountability is important. When I'm accountable to you, I become accountable to myself.

a. ***The Approach Explained***

You say, "After I've taken care of the beam in my own eye, how do I approach the person that has fallen into sin?" Matthew 18:15 tells us what to do: "*...if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone...*" If a person in your church sins, then approach him about it alone. For example, if you know a Christian that is a dishonest businessman who mistreats his employees, then you have an obligation before God to go to that person and--in a loving way--say, "What you are doing is wrong." You say, "I can't do that. I've got my own problems." Then take care of the problems in your own life! You say, "That will take a while." No; all you need to do is make a prayer of confession (1 Jn. 1:9). Then, with a pure heart and loving spirit, you can approach a Christian who is sinning.

Some other examples of when you should confront other people are if you know someone that's not being faithful to his spouse, parents that aren't bringing up their children as they should, or children that aren't obeying their parents. Knowing that your own life has to be right before you can approach a sinning brother will have a self-purifying effect. If we all did that, then we would be making sure that our own lives are right. Everyone in a church must be accountable to someone else--it doesn't matter who you are. In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul says that he rebuked Peter publicly for doing something wrong. Elders and leaders are not exempt from rebuke. If they are rebuked, it is to be done before the church so that others may fear and avoid sin (1 Tim. 5:20).

b. ***The Appreciation Expressed***

I once received a letter from someone that noticed something wrong in my life, and I wrote back to him asking for his forgiveness and thanking him for bringing it to my attention. If something is wrong in my life, I want to know it. But if someone doesn't tell me because they're afraid to, then I'll keep making the same mistake again. Everyone in a church should have that kind of accountability with one another so that everyone's life is pure. Even husbands and wives should hold one another accountable. It isn't right for anyone's sinfulness to be tolerated. Anyone in sin should be lovingly confronted.

c. ***The Antagonism Encountered***

You say, "What if the sinning person doesn't listen to me?" Matthew 18:16 says, "*But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.*" If the person you are confronting still doesn't listen, then verse 17 says to "*tell it unto the church.*" Have everyone in the church encourage the sinning brother to repent. That's the responsibility involved in accountability. Doing that helps keep the church pure.

d. ***The Apprehension Eliminated***

1) *The Fear of Confronting Others*

When church discipline was first applied at Grace Church, a couple of the pastors said to me, "It won't work. The church will be wrecked. You can't have everyone watching out for other people's sins." I said, "The Bible says we're supposed to be accountable to one another. Let's just do it and see what God does." We are not to worry about building the church; Christ said He would take care of that (Mt. 16:18). All we are supposed to do is make sure that everyone in the church understands the Word of God and applies it. God will take care of everything else.

2) *The Fruit of Confronting Others*

I have a wonderful illustration of how church discipline worked for the good of Grace Church. A woman called me one day and said, "My husband just left me; he is going to live with another woman." I asked her for the name of that other woman, and she gave it to me. I found the woman's telephone number, and called her. The husband of the woman who had called me answered the telephone. I said, "This is John calling from Grace Church. I'm calling in the name of Christ for you to move out of that woman's place before you sin against God, your wife, and your church." He was shocked, and said he would go back to his wife. The next Sunday, he came up to me, embraced me, and said, "Thank you! I didn't want to be there. I was tempted, and I thought no one would care about that." He wasn't alienated by my rebuke; rather, he was brought back to the fellowship and obedience.

Confrontation is necessary to help restore a sinning brother. Sometimes a Christian will do something he doesn't want to do, and it will require the rebuke of another Christian to pull him out of it. Paul said he struggled with the flesh: "*For that which I do I understand not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I*" (Rom. 7:15). Confrontation is not intended for invading people's privacy; it's for the purpose of helping others in their battle with sin. We need to be concerned about accountability. That's one reason that Communion is important. It reminds us to make sure our lives are right so that we can restore each other in love, and provoke one another to love and good works (Heb. 10:24).

Accountability involves the one-anothers of Scripture. We are to exhort one another (Heb. 10:24-25), pray for one another (Jas. 5:16), love one another (Gal. 5:13; Eph. 4:2; 1 Pet. 1:22), teach one another (Col. 3:16), edify one another (Rom. 14:19; 1 Thess. 5:11), and admonish one another (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16). Those things make up the life of the church.

The next attitude I'd like to talk about is necessary to have along with accountability:

K. **Forgiveness**

The church can't survive without forgiveness. It's an important attitude because we're human and we all sin. If you can't forgive someone that sins, particularly someone that sins against you, then you've got a cancer in you and in the body of Christ.

1. CLARIFIED

a. ***Receiving Forgiveness***

Look at what Matthew 6:12 says about forgiveness: "*...forgive us our debts [every sin is a debt owed to God and can only be paid by the perfect sacrifice of Christ], as we forgive our debtors.*" In other words, "God, forgive us as we forgive others." Verses 14-15 tell us, "*For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*" If you don't forgive other people, God won't forgive you.

Matthew 6:12, 14-15 is not talking about the eternal, redemptive forgiveness we receive when we accept Christ as our Savior. It's talking about a parental, temporal forgiveness. It's a forgiveness related to current sin. We need to have a forgiving attitude if we want to have pure, blessed fellowship with God and fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

b. ***Refusing Forgiveness***

If you don't forgive someone, then you have a cancer in you. I believe that an unforgiving heart can cause tragedy. I think that the body catches the soul's diseases, and that there may be many people that have died because they had an unforgiving spirit. Guilt is the severest of the soul's diseases. Both guilt and an unforgiving heart create bitter feelings.

If you want to be forgiven by the Lord on a daily basis and maintain a pure, sweet fellowship with Him, then you need to have a forgiving heart toward others. How can you possibly not forgive others? Who are you not to forgive? In Matthew 18:23-34 there is a parable about a man that owed his master ten thousand talents (an incalculable debt). The master forgave that man and erased his debt. Later on, that man found a friend of his who owed him a hundred denarii (a trivial amount compared to the former debt). He strangled him, and had him put in jail. At the end of the parable, Jesus said, "How can those of you that have been forgiven an unpayable debt not forgive someone else that wrongs you?"

2. COMMANDED

Ephesians 4:32 says, *"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you."* We should forgive one another because God has forgiven us. How can we be forgiven so much and forgive others so little? The church needs to be filled with forgiving people, because there will always be people that fail. People are always going to do things that will irritate others or cause problems. If you're willing to forgive an offender, then you'll be free from the bondage of bitterness. You'll also be free to be forgiven by God, and experience blessing from Him. Forgiveness is a beautiful attitude. You don't need to have an unforgiving, bitter heart.

When the attitude of forgiveness is not present in a church, there will be problems. By the way, only humble people forgive. A proud person that is sinned against will say, "You can't get away with doing that to someone like me!" But a humble person will say, "You're more important than me. I want to love you by showing forgiveness."

So, the people of a church must have the attitudes of self-discipline, accountability for others, and forgiveness.

Focusing on the Facts

1. In his book *God's Forgetful Pilgrims*, what did Michael Griffiths say was the problem with many people that go to church?
2. Gene Getz mentioned some things that people say make a mature church. What are they? Do those characteristics make a mature church? Explain.
3. Define self-discipline.
4. God has called believers to run a race (Gal. 5:7; Phil. 2:16; Heb. 12:1-2). How are we to race (1 Cor. 9:25a)? How can we accomplish that goal?
5. According to 2 Timothy 2:5, what else must a believer do when he races? What does the Greek verb used for *"striveth for the mastery"* speak of (1 Cor. 9:25a)?
6. According to Ephesians 6:12, why is it important for us to wear the armor of God in spiritual warfare? Who are our real enemies in spiritual warfare?
7. What does it mean to put on the belt of truthfulness?
8. What is meant by putting on the breastplate of righteousness?
9. What is self-discipline related to? How does a person develop a pure, self-disciplined life? According to Psalm 119:11, what did the psalmist do, and why?
10. If you allow your children to go to an R-rated movie, what are you contributing to in their lives?
11. A person who watches R-rated movies or reads pornographic magazines can't expect himself to cultivate _____.
12. What principle is stated in Matthew 7:3-4? What are the two responsibilities of a person in an accountability relationship?
13. What must you do before you approach a sinning believer?
14. How are you to approach a sinning believer (Mt. 18:15)?
15. Is anyone exempt from rebuke? Explain.

16. What should you do if a sinning believer doesn't listen to you (Mt. 18:16)? If a sinning believer continues in his sin, what is the church to do?
17. What is the intent of confronting a sinning believer?
18. What does Matthew 6:14-15 say about forgiveness?
19. What can result from having an unforgiving heart?
20. Why should we be willing to forgive one another (Eph. 4:32)? What results from being willing to forgive someone that sins against you?

Pondering the Principles

1. Living for God is like running a race: It needs to be done with self-discipline, a whole heart, and by keeping the rules. Hebrews 12:1-2 says, "*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*" (NASB). When we live for God, we are to "*lay aside every encumbrance.*" Are there things in your life that divert your attention from God or dampen your enthusiasm for spiritual things? What are they? How are they affecting you? Are you willing to lay those encumbrances aside? Why or why not? Your answers to the last two questions will show how committed you are to God's calling. Read Hebrews 12:1-2 again, and prayerfully make a commitment to "*run with endurance the race that is set before us.*"
2. All believers should be accountable to one another. Having everyone in a church be accountable to one another helps keep a church pure. If a coach told an athlete to exercise for four hours every day, but wasn't present to make sure the exercises were done, how well do you think the athlete would perform his task? Suppose the athlete is doing one of his exercises wrong, and is hurting his chances of performing well in his sport. Should the coach tell the athlete what he's doing wrong? If the coach corrects the athlete's problem, what should be the athlete's response? Do you have anyone to be accountable to for what you learn from the Bible? How do you respond when people point out your sins? If you do not have someone to "coach" you in your walk with God, develop an accountability relationship with someone. If you are already accountable to someone, make sure that neither of you have fallen below the standards God has set for holy living.
3. When someone sins against you, do you think of avenging yourself? How long do you hold grudges against someone that has offended you? Is it right for you to seek revenge or hold grudges? Why? When someone sins against you, how long does it take you to forgive them? Work on developing a forgiving heart toward others, and make a goal of being able to forgive others immediately after they sin against you.