

LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Making Room for the Family
Selected Scriptures



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Most people from large families were too young to remember all that their parents went through as their family expanded. Some of us who are parents of several children have vivid memories of how we shifted and adjusted, bought bunk beds, and added on to our house to make room for more. Growing families—especially those whose numbers continue to enlarge—call for all kinds of creative responses.

Growing churches experience the same kind of stresses. There are times when attending a growing church is exciting . . . and other times when it is irritating. Church parking lots choked with cars, pews packed with people, nurseries and Sunday school classes full to the brim, and long lines waiting to enter the worship center isn't anyone's idea of a relaxed morning at church!

At times like these, questions arise. Should a church get this large? Wasn't the first-century church small and easy to manage? Is it okay to make more room for our growing family . . . or should we attend elsewhere? The answers to these types of questions may surprise you.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Quick Look at How We Got Here

We have large, growing churches today. Worshipers attend these churches by the thousands each weekend. No doubt these churches would all claim that their growth is due to the work of God's Spirit (Zechariah 4:6). But the question we must wrestle with in light of such exponential growth is a simple one: Can such large congregations be supported by the biblical record?



Quotable

*God often turns
tragedies into
yet another
opportunity for
spiritual growth.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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MM01

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DOORWAY TO HISTORY

Discovering the Gates of Hades

Of all the gods of Greek mythology, he was one of the ugliest — with goat's horns growing from his head, goat's hooves in place of feet, and the shaggy hair of a goat covering his lower body. But the half-man, half-goat god, Pan, was merry, bounding among the thickets and mountains playing his reed pipe. It was among the trees and craggy hillsides of Caesarea Philippi that a temple was built to honor Pan. At the base of this temple exists a cave long believed by those who worshiped there to be the doorway into the netherworld. Worshipers threw goats from the precipice into the mouth of the cave in hopes that their sacrifice would be acceptable to Pan.

It was in the vicinity of this grotto, the alleged gateway to hell, that Jesus promised: "I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). Beginning with a small group of Jewish outsiders in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, Christ built His church to reach even the remotest parts of the world. And from that day to this, Satan has attempted to destroy Christ's church — yet it endures. Despite controversies, wars, and denominational splits, the church continues to be the means through which God announces to a dark and dying world that light and life have come in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

2. A Close Look at What Happened Then

The church in the era of the apostles was anything but small. The response to Peter's first sermon added three thousand new believers to the church (Acts 2:41). The additions only continued through the faithful preaching of the apostles. This exponential growth was not something man-made either. Rather, God was with the church as it continued to grow (11:21).

Of course, any church with people will struggle. Add more people, and watch the troubles increase. Human beings tainted by sin have always made up the church. Therefore, when Ananias and Sapphira darkened the doors of the Jerusalem church, they were, in a way, forerunners of the troubles that would infiltrate the church throughout its history. However, none of the troubles changed the growth pattern for the church that God had in mind. Even after the difficulties surrounding church leadership, God's gospel continued to spread (6:1–7).



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LET'S LIVE IT

God stretches us and teaches us through new ideas we could never have imagined. So what does that mean for the church going forward?

- First, *churches must have vision because vision broadens our perspective and gets us out of our own backyard.* Vision keeps us all flexible and unselfish.
- Second, *churches must have creativity because creativity enlarges the possibilities.* Creativity brings new vistas into view, keeping us innovative and open to whatever is coming ahead.

Are you a person of vision and creativity? How do these values play out in your life?



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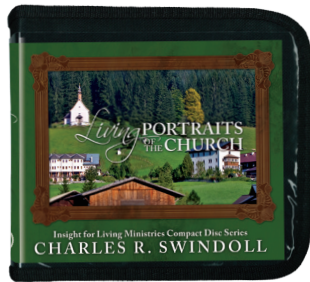
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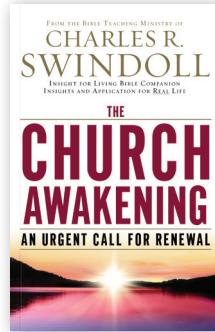
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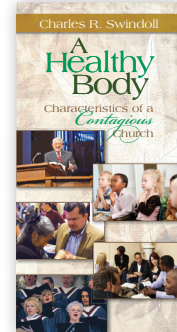
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LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Feeding the Flock a Healthy Meal
Selected Scriptures



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Among the many portraits of the church painted in Scripture, none is more calming and comforting than a flock of sheep under the watchful eye of a caring shepherd. And when we add the presence of a pasture full of lush, green grass, the picture is even more appealing.

But this is almost too idealistic. The truth is, not all sheep stay in the flock . . . not all shepherds are caring and faithful . . . not all that's lush and green is edible grass . . . and not all peaceful places are free of danger. Let's trace this analogy through several scriptural scenes. Hopefully, the time we spend in God's Word will leave us with a realistic awareness of what it means to be among our Shepherd's flock and how it feels to be fed from His hand.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. When It Comes to Sheep, Remember . . .

We might have the impression that sheep are smart animals, that the Bible's comparison of God's people to sheep is a high compliment. However, we should keep in mind several key facts about sheep.

First, *sheep lack any sense of direction*. They get turned around and cannot find food easily. Second, *sheep are virtually defenseless*. Furthermore, they are easily frightened. Third, *sheep are, by nature, extremely unclean*. The oils that sheep secrete ensure that sheep draw all kinds of dirt and filth into their wool. All that said, *sheep know the voice of their shepherd*. When a sheep hears the voice of its shepherd, the sheep follows.



Quotable

*Be a good example
to others.*

They're watching.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Feeding the Flock a Healthy Meal

Selected Scriptures

2. When It Comes to Shepherds, Don't Forget . . .

Thinking well about sheep means we also need to think about those who keep sheep: the shepherds. Three factors are significant.

First, *shepherds are essential for a sheep's survival*. Since sheep cannot protect themselves or find food for themselves, they need shepherds to survive. Second, *shepherds know which sheep belong to them*. In this way, shepherds can keep track of their own sheep. And finally, *not all shepherds are faithful and trustworthy*. When trouble comes and the shepherd disappears, the sheep can know that the shepherd is not someone to rely upon.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

In It for the Money

When Jesus speaks about shepherds in John 10, the Lord offered a contrast to His own image of the Good Shepherd. He called this lesser shepherd *misthotos*, or a “hired hand.” The noun comes from the verb which means “to hire” or “to pay a wage.” The focus of Jesus’s words are unmistakable—some shepherds are in it for the money. Some are looking to get paid, first and foremost. These shepherds have no heart for the sheep. These shepherds have no commitment to the sheep. And these shepherds have no love for the sheep.



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LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Feeding the Flock a Healthy Meal

Selected Scriptures

3. Wise Counsel to All Who Are Sheep

In Jesus's discourse from John 10, the Lord offered three pieces of wise counsel to His flock—those who follow Him: First, *be sure to listen to the voice of the right shepherd*. We need our ears attuned to the Lord, not to one who will lead us astray. Second, *never hesitate to follow where the Good Shepherd leads*. When our ears are attuned to the right shepherd, we know we can trust Him to lead us well. And finally, *use discernment when choosing your door*. We all have the option of whom to follow. Discernment will help guide us toward that shepherd who has our best interests at heart.

And in Acts 20, the missionary apostle Paul offered one further piece of keen advice to God's flock: *Watch out for wolves that look like sheep*. We need to be aware that there are those among us, even in the church, who seek to lead us away from the Lord.



LET'S LIVE IT

The Bible offers four warnings to all who serve in some capacity as shepherds to other people.

- First, *be sure you're not serving yourself instead of the sheep*.
- Second, *pay close attention to sheep who need special care*.
- Third, *take a gutsy examination of yourself*.
- Fourth, *be a good example to the flock*.

Have you ever followed a bad example in the church? What kinds of damage have you seen or could you see resulting from this bad example?



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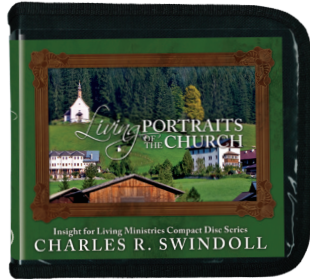
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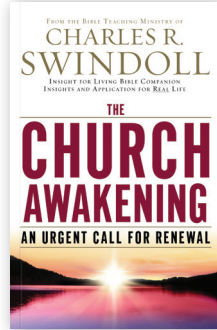
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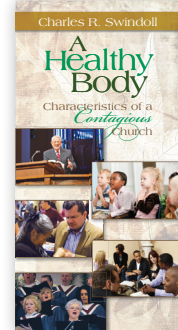
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LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Finding Your Place in the Body

1 Corinthians 12:4–27



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Studies in anatomy occupy the attention of every medical student in the world. If they hope to understand how to help people with physical needs, they must know how the body is put together, how it functions, and what causes it to malfunction.

Christians would do well to emulate students of medicine. Since we are members of His body, over which Christ serves as the Head, understanding the body would give us a better understanding of the church—how it's put together, how it functions, and how to respond when it malfunctions. Just as the human body is fearfully and wonderfully made, so is Christ's universal body. It is full of variety and diversity, yet harmony can exist. It is designed to be active, healthy, and productive, yet disease can invade, bringing aches and pains, causing crippling results and leading to a breakdown and even a paralysis of certain parts of the body. As we seek a better understanding of this third analogy of the church (the others were family and flock), let's keep the mental picture of a body uppermost in our thinking.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Communication: Benefits of Using Simple Analogies

The writers of and speakers in the Bible often use word pictures and analogies to get their points across. With a form of communication that is so dominant, it helps us to consider its value to us, especially as we seek to understand the church through biblical analogies. Three significant features of these analogies, particularly in the teaching of Jesus, rise to the top.

First, *analogies use the familiar to explain the unfamiliar*. People can identify with searching for a lost coin or sowing seed on a plot of land. Jesus often started right where people were. Second, *analogies simplify the complicated*. Jesus spoke in terms that even children could understand, bringing near to people that which was profound. Finally, *analogies provide word pictures that are easily remembered*. When we hear a story or get a concrete object in our minds, we are more apt to remember the teaching than if we were just dealing with abstract ideas.



Quotable

*The church is
not our body, but
Christ's body.
He is the only
Head.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Finding Your Place in the Body

1 Corinthians 12:4–27

2. Observation: Insights from Examining Human Anatomy

As we examine Paul’s analogy of the body in 1 Corinthians 12:4–27, we find two distinct emphases. First, Paul emphasized that the church should remain unified in the midst of diversity. Later in the passage, Paul stressed that our diversity should be held together in unity. In other words, Paul placed both unity and diversity out in front, giving them both pride of place in this passage. That means we can neither discard unity nor diversity, but we should strive to live well with both as goals for the body of Christ.

Three particular thoughts come to mind as we think carefully about the diversity of the body. First, *there are many parts . . . each one is important*. We should not have the mind-set that someone else’s gift or contribution is important while ours is not. Every person can make valuable contributions to the church. Second, *there are many parts . . . all are interdependent*. Within the church, we all depend on one another to exercise our own gifts and talents so that others benefit. Finally, *there are many parts . . . none is exclusive*. Jesus is the Head of the body, and all who follow Him make up the body. We are not exclusive to ourselves, nor is the church just about Jesus and each of our individual lives—the collective matters.



A CLOSER LOOK

Signs of Vitality in the Body of Christ

Sometimes people ask, “Do I have to join a church to become a Christian?” No, but once you become a Christian, God *wants* you to join a local church for teaching and fellowship. You automatically become a member of the universal body, His church, when you believe. No problem there. Usually, the problems begin to occur when we join a local church made up of fallible people just like us. Attending church should be a joyful and uplifting experience, but it may not be if a church’s vital signs of health and wholeness are missing. Therefore, when looking to join a body of Christ’s followers, look for signs of vitality and health such as unity and harmony, an absence of prejudice, an emphasis on individual dignity and mutual variety, a de-emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency, the support of others, and the exaltation of Christ as the Head and supreme authority.



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LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Finding Your Place in the Body

1 Corinthians 12:4–27



LET'S LIVE IT

People might have different reactions to Paul's teaching on the body of Christ. Three come to mind:

- First, *"Lord, thank you for including me."* Some will hear the teaching about Christ's body, the church, and be grateful to be a part of it.
- Second, *"Lord, I'm available!"* Others, when confronted with the reality of the church, will make clear their availability to the Lord.
- Third, *"Lord, without You, I'm out of control."* When we recognize we need Christ as our Head in the church, we will understand our own impulsiveness.

How does Paul's teaching on the body of Christ make you react? Where do you see yourself in regard to the three options above? What makes you say that?



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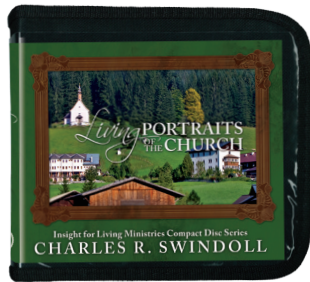
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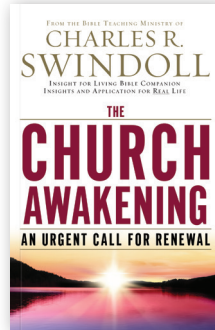
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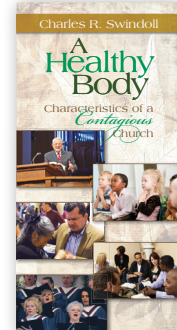
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LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Abiding in the Vine

John 15:1–11



LET'S BEGIN HERE

In the three previous messages, we have examined other “living portraits” of the universal church of Jesus Christ: a growing *family*, a flock of *sheep*, and a human *body*. Each analogy conveys different aspects of God’s people on earth.

We have come to the fourth and final mental picture—a productive *vine*—another vivid analogy preserved for us in the Word of God. In fact, this one comes to us from the lips of Jesus as He left His disciples words of encouragement just before He was crucified. They have been recorded for us in the fifteenth chapter of John, a chapter that centers attention on three vital relationships the Christian must maintain. Our hope is to focus on the first eleven verses, where we shall learn the one-word secret of producing fruit in our daily life.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Overall Survey of John 15

John 15 marks the moment where Jesus told His followers how to carry on building the church after His ascension. The chapter divides easily into three distinct sections.

First, *Jesus addressed the believer’s relationship with Christ* (John 15:1–11). God’s people were to abide in Christ, pursuing protecting the union between them and Christ. Second, *Jesus addressed the believer’s relationship with other believers* (15:12–17). God’s people were to love one another, seeking out communion with one another. Third, *Jesus addressed the believer’s relationship with the world* (15:18–27). God’s people were to hate the world, living in a state of disunion with those opposed to Christ.



Quotable

*You can’t produce
the fruit of the
Spirit without the
One who fills you
with power to grow.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Abiding in the Vine

John 15:1–11

2. Specific Study of the Vine and the Branches

The first eleven verses of John 15 make clear the believer's connection to Christ. Four general observations can give us a foothold in the passage. First, *the instruction is for believers only*. Only believers abide in Christ because only believers cling to life in the vine. Second, *the verses revolve around a symbol*. The vine and the branch would have been familiar imagery for those in first-century Israel. Third, *the main subject is abiding*. And fourth, *the result of abiding is fruit-bearing*.

Digging a bit deeper into the symbolism of the passage, we can make specific comments about the vine, the vinedresser, and the branches. The vine is Christ, as Jesus Himself says directly (John 15:1). John 15:1 also makes clear that the vinedresser is the Father. And the branches are identified as Jesus's followers (15:5). The branches, when connected to the vine, bear fruit. The fruit comes not as a result of its own power but because of the life the fruit receives from the vine itself.



LET'S LIVE IT

Two contrasting responses are common in light of a passage like John 15.

- First, *refusal to abide leads to barrenness*. There will be those who refuse to stick with Christ, and as a result they will bear no fruit.
- Second, *willingness to abide results in fruitfulness*. Those who stick closely to Christ will find their lives to be fruit-bearing.

Where do you sit on the spectrum of abiding? What evidence do you have in your life as a result of your abiding in Christ?



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LIVING PORTRAITS OF THE CHURCH

Abiding in the Vine

John 15:1–11

Survey Chart of John 15

For centuries the fifteenth chapter of John has been a source of encouragement and inspiration for God's people. While it is written in simple terms, it contains some of the most profound, valuable, and helpful truths Jesus ever taught. Here is a chart that provides an overall survey of how the chapter fits together.

Suggested Theme of John 15: *The Most Important Relationships a Believer Maintains*

Overall Survey of Chapter:

SECTION	RELATIONSHIP	KEY TERM	EMPHASIS
Verses 1–11	Believer with <u>Christ</u>	“ <u>Abide</u> ” (10 times in 11 verses)	Union
Verses 12–17	Believer with <u>Believer</u>	“ <u>Love</u> ” (4 times in 6 verses)	Communion
Verses 18–27	Believer with <u>the World</u>	“ <u>Hate</u> ” (8 times in 10 verses)	Disunion

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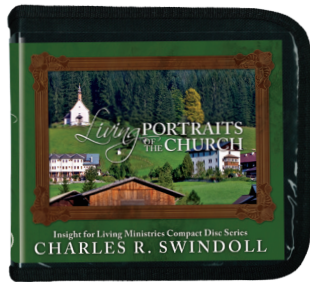
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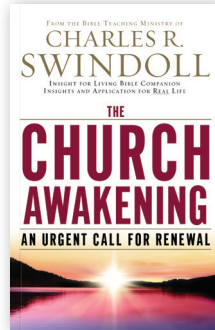
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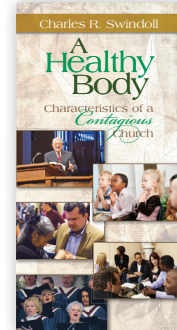
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