

FULL FAITH PART 5

**PLANTS IN THE
GARDEN OF THE LORD**



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Plants in the Garden of the Lord
Full Faith Part 5
A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Welcome to *Plants in the Garden of the Lord*

Welcome to *Plants in the Garden of the Lord*, in which we learn that full faith depends in large part on our churches becoming the gardens our King intends. *Plants in the Garden of the Lord* is Part 5 of a 10-part series entitled, *Full Faith*, and is one of our *ReVision* series of studies in Kingdom living.

As followers of Christ, we don't "go it alone" in the life of full faith. We are members of the Body of Christ – as Solomon might have said it, plants in the garden of the Lord. We will flourish as individual plants as the whole garden of the Lord is cultivated by the living waters of Christ's Word and Spirit, releasing sweet fragrances and bounteous fruit into our lives and communities.

But, like everything else in the life of faith, such gardens of blessing don't just happen. We have to work hard to bear fruit, as individual plants and variegated gardens, or the reality of Jesus alive from the dead simply will not come to the attention of the people around us. In this study we'll take a brief look at the kind of fruit the Lord is seeking from His garden, and we'll consider ways of helping to make this more of a reality in our lives and churches.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time. Read through the study and reflect on the questions provided. Be sure to do the *Next steps* assignment each day, as this will help you put your learning into practice. Use the questions at the end of the study to reflect on what you have learned.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your understanding of the Christian faith, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God, and life in His Kingdom.

If you have not already, we invite you to subscribe to *ReVision* so that you can receive it daily on your computer, tablet, or smart phone. Visit our website, www.ailbe.org, where you can subscribe to *ReVision* and our other newsletters.

Our prayer is that this study will enlarge your vision of Christ and His Kingdom, and encourage you to greater faith, boldness, and consistency in living for Him.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Locked, Dammed, Sealed

A garden enclosed
Is *my sister*, my *spouse*,
A spring shut up,
A fountain sealed. Song of Solomon 4.12

The Bride of Christ

One of the New Testament's favorite images of the Church is that of the Bride of Christ. John the Baptist seems to have been the first to use this image (Jn. 3.29), but Jesus also picked up on it and made it His own, as we see in several of His parables.

The image of the Church as the Bride of Christ also appealed to the Apostles Paul (Eph. 5) and John (Rev. 19). This is an altogether fitting way to think about the relationship between the Lord and His Church. It allows us to capture the intimacy, mutual adoration, continuous collaboration, and eternal bond between the Lord and His people that the Scriptures hold out as the promise of salvation and the life of full faith.

It is precisely this image that has led many commentators and students of the Bible – particularly in the earlier years of the Church – to regard the Song of Solomon as a kind of extended metaphor expressing the love that exists between the Lord and His people. In this dramatic love story Solomon is seen to stand for the Lord – the King Who comes to claim His Bride and take her to Himself in blissful love – while his bride-to-be represents all those for whom Christ died, and who seek to know, love, and serve Him by grace through faith.

While the Song offers many helpful insights concerning ways to nurture human love in marriage, its primary message seems to be one of comfort and hope to the people of God: Their Lord is coming to redeem them from their isolation and loneliness and take them to Himself forever.

Fruitfulness and life

In that light, therefore, we must consider what the Lord meant us to understand about His Church when Solomon referred to his own bride as a garden, a spring, and a fountain. What does it mean for us to think of ourselves and our church in these terms? How should such images counsel us to think about the life of full faith to which we have been called in the Lord?

Each of these items was acknowledged as a vital source of life, fruitfulness, refreshment, and wellbeing in ancient Israel, as, indeed, they are to this day. A *garden* provides both an abundance of food for a family as well as flowering plants and fragrant spices to lend beauty to a home. It is a source of life and fruitfulness to bless those who care for it.

The waters of a *spring* or a *well* would have been crucial to survival, particularly in a land like Israel that is dry so much of the time. We recall the struggles Isaac had with his Philistine neighbors over the wells in Gerar.

Solomon viewed his bride in this light – like a garden, spring, and well – to express just how much he valued her and what high hopes and great prospect he held out for her to become a wellspring of life, fruitfulness, and blessing as his wife.

The Bride of the Lord

By means of this metaphor, the Lord is giving us a glimpse of how He views His own Bride, the Church, and of the expectations He holds out for each one who strives to know full faith.

Each believer in Jesus is a plant in the garden of the Lord. Jesus intends His plants and garden to bring forth abundant *spiritual* nourishment, the sweet fragrances of new life in Christ, and living waters of the Spirit to redeem and transform men and reconcile culture and creation back to God. The Lord holds out high expectations and precious and very great promises for those who live in full faith before Him.

But note that Solomon's bride was a garden *enclosed* or *locked*, a spring *shut up* or *dammed*, and a fountain *sealed*. That is, she was not yet realizing her potential, for the simple reason that she was not yet united with her husband, the king. Only when Solomon and his bride were bound together and growing in love could the full potential of their mutual love spring forth in the fullness God intended for them.

In many ways the same thing can be said of the Church today. As believers and churches, we are not realizing our full potential to bring the blessings of God and His Word to the world. This is obvious on every hand, particularly in the West, where, even though outwardly churches appear to be thriving, yet the culture and society in which they are embedded continues spiraling downward away from the Lord (Rom. 1.18-32).

The reason for this can be found in one of two places, or both: First, the Church may not have a proper understanding of itself or its mission; or, second, the Church may not be sufficiently intimate with its Lord to bear the fruit and realize the potential He holds out for her.

Christians have great possibilities as the Bride of Christ, for bearing fruit, sharing light and life, and refreshing the parched souls of our neighbors. But do we really understand this, and are we seeking it as earnestly as Solomon's betrothed sought her king?

For reflection

1. Think about your own life in Christ. What do the ideas of a garden, spring, or well suggest about what your life should be like?
2. Why do you think churches today – especially in the West – are not having the kind of impact their numbers might suggest?
3. What do you hope to learn from this study, as you think about your life in the terms Solomon indicates in Song of Solomon?

Next steps: What would a church look like that was a garden, spring, and well in its community? Talk with some of your fellow church members about this question.

2 A Varied and Bounteous Prospect

*I have come to my garden, my sister, my spouse;
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice;
I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey;
I have drunk my wine with my milk.* Song of Solomon 5.1

Bounty for the Lord

The Church, the Bride of Christ is the garden of the Lord, a bountiful source of blessings for the world, and a delight to the Lord as well. Solomon came to his “garden” – his wife – to enjoy the good fruit of their relationship. Song of Solomon is a celebration of love anticipated, realized, and bearing fruit in joy.

But the bride in Song of Solomon also represents the Church and her relationship with the Lord. Each of us as believers is part of that image – plants in the garden of the Lord – and we must read the Song of Solomon as guiding us in our relationship with our King. When the Lord comes to His Church, He expects to find her brimming with bounty for the world and for His own enjoyment and delight. Each believer who is living full faith, cultivating a strong soul by the water of God’s Word and Spirit, should seek to bring forth fruit for blessing as a result of his or her relationship with the Lord. Bounteous plants make for bounteous gardens; healthy gardens grow bounteous plants.

What kind of bounty is the Lord looking for from His Church? The New Testament doesn’t leave us guessing about this; instead, the apostles make crystal clear the kind of flower, fragrance, and fruit Jesus is calling His Church to bear before the world and His glorious throne.

We might mention four kinds of fruit in particular which the Lord is seeking from His Church, and from each of His followers.

Holiness

The first is the fruit of *holiness* which, grounded in the fear of the Lord, comes from walking in obedience to His Word and Law (2 Cor. 7.1; 1 Jn. 2.1-6; Rom. 7.12).

The Lord Jesus sows good seed into His Church – the pure and holy milk and meat of the Word of God. When that seed takes root in the hearts of His people, it should bear appropriate fruit. A *holy* Word, sown by our *holy* Lord and cultivated by the *Holy* Spirit, is intended to bear the fruit of *holiness* in the lives of God’s people. Our goal must be that, from the garden and wellspring of our strong souls, we should work out our salvation by perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord (Phil. 2.12, 13).

The members of the Body of Christ must not suppose that they can unite with the Lord and continue to live according to the standards of our unbelieving age. Our holy King is calling His Bride to be like Him, holy. Holiness is the first fruit the Lord is seeking from His garden.

The fruit of the Spirit

The second is the fruit of the *Spirit*, all those lush and delightful *virtues* that define the nature and character of our relationships with others – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5.22, 23).

These are but particular expressions of holiness in the interpersonal realm, and believers are called to bear this fruit in all their relationships. That won’t happen, however, apart from a commitment to bringing holiness to ever fuller levels of completion in our lives.

Loving service

The tokens of *loving service* are the third fruit which the holy Word and Spirit are cultivating within the Church (Eph. 4.12; Jn. 13.1-15).

Pastors and teachers are called to equip the members of their congregations so that real, transforming ministry issues from them in all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities. Each believer must become so immersed in the Word and Spirit of God that the good works of ministry these bring forth will issue from us like fruit to bless and water to refresh.

In ministry believers humble themselves to be alert to the needs of those around them. Then, following the example of Jesus, they gather whatever resources are needed and reach out in loving service to minister grace and truth to the people in their spheres of influence. Personal spiritual disciplines and pastoral preaching and teaching are the trowels, rakes, and watering hose which the Lord uses to cultivate the fruit of *ministry* in the members of His Body.

Witness

Finally, the Church is called to bear the fruit of *witness* in the world (Acts 1.8). In our day many churches have backed off from encouraging and equipping their members to reach their neighbors for Christ. In place of such active and loving outreach, churches have determined to make their worship service and other activities the primary draw for seekers needing to hear the Good News. But the Lord did not command the world to go to church. Rather, He is building His Church and cultivating her by His Word and Spirit so that church members might make disciples as they are going about in the daily arenas of their lives.

The Lord is seeking certain fruit from His garden. We must make sure that we are working hard to cultivate that fruit. Strong souls, focused on the expectations of the Lord, will work to bring forth the fruit and refreshment of blessing each is capable of bearing.

For reflection

1. How would you describe the state of holiness, spiritual fruit, loving ministry, and witness in your life at this time?
2. What specifically does your church do to help its members bear such fruit?
3. In your own time with the Lord, how do you concentrate on growing in these four areas of fruitfulness?

Next steps: In each of the four areas of fruitfulness mentioned in this lesson, identify one area where you need to grow. Then talk with a pastor or church leader about how you might become more fruitful in these areas.

3 Hindrances to Fruitfulness

*A garden enclosed
Is my sister, my spouse,
A spring shut up,
A fountain sealed.* Song of Solomon 4.12

Blockages

We are beginning to see what the Lord expects from His garden, His Bride – the Church – and of each one of us who follows Him in full faith as plants in that garden. In our day churches do not appear to be asserting a presence of holiness, spiritual fruit, loving service, and active witness. It's not that these are not happening. They are, in many places. We should be encouraged by this, and should seek more such fruit for the praise and glory of our King.

However, as a whole I think we can agree that our churches, if they are bearing this fruit, are sharing it primarily within the household of faith and not in the world at large. The world beyond the church continues its downward spiral into moral relativism, cultural depravity, institutional breakdown, corruption, violence, disappointment, and despair. If the Church, and each of us as individual disciples, were salting and leavening the society the way we should, surely these ills would be on the decline, rather than on the rise.

So it seems that something is blocking the Church from realizing the full potential of fruit which the Lord intends for her. As Solomon complained that his own bride was locked, dammed, and sealed up, so that he could not realize the fruit of their relationship, so the Church today seems to be experiencing some blockage of its own, something that is keeping us from realizing our full fruitfulness as the garden of the Lord.

Three hindrances in particular stand between the Church and the full, flowering, fruitful, and fragrant blossoming of holiness, spiritual fruit, ministry, and witness. Unless pastors and church leaders recognize these hindrances and deal with them aggressively, the Church will continue to fall short of our Lord's expectations.

Narcissism

The first hindrance is a kind of spiritual narcissism.

Many churches today have turned inward, and are focusing their energies and resources on creating a kind of isolated community that caters to the felt needs of the members. The money, buildings, and staff they employ for the work of ministry are almost exclusively devoted to doing things and sponsoring activities for the members of the church. In our churches we're just all about us. We welcome any who might like to join us, but we're too busy satisfying our own needs to seek any lost people for salvation.

Rick Warren sensed this narcissistic trend among churches and expressed his concern about it in the opening lines of his best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*: "It's not about you." David Wells has commented that the effect of this spiritual narcissism is to make of the church's vision something small, shrunken, and ineffectual.

The fruit of the Lord's garden is, first and foremost, for the pleasure of the Lord, not our own pleasure. Whatever we're doing to maximize our own pleasure, rather than that of the Lord, we must repent of and begin to rediscover our true purpose as the Bride of Christ.

Fear of men

The second hindrance is the fear of men. This takes a variety of forms: we fear offending others; we're afraid

of their insults and scorn; we fear getting to know new people – unlovely and unloveable people, especially; and we fear being exposed as hypocrites because we do not “walk the talk” the way we should. Jesus knows that we will never bear fruit for His glory as long as we fear men; this is why He commanded us to fear God and to live wholly unto Him (Matt. 10.28-33).

The fear of men is a snare that bottles us up and locks, dams, and seals the blessings of the Lord from the people around us.

Departures from Scripture

Finally, the Church is hindered from realizing her full potential by subtle departures from the clear teaching of Scripture on the part of church leaders.

Whenever we substitute doing something the world’s way for doing what the Lord has clearly revealed in His Word, we cut ourselves off from the transforming power of grace and Truth. Wherever we are doing so – in our worship, how we organize and lead our churches, compromised teaching, or by minimizing the requirements of true discipleship – we are choking off the church’s ability to be the garden of the Lord.

Let church leaders examine their own churches and practice in each of these areas: Are we hindering or nurturing our churches as gardens of the Lord?

For reflection

1. Do you see any evidence of spiritual narcissism in your church? Explain.
2. What would you suggest as the best way to overcome the fear of men?
3. How can you tell when you or your church are doing anything in a way other than what God prescribes in His Word?

Next steps: Talk with some fellow church members about the three questions above.

4 The Liberating Power of the Spirit

*Awake, O north wind,
And come, O south!
Blow upon my garden,
That its spices may flow out.
Let my beloved come to his garden
And eat its pleasant fruits.* Song of Solomon 4.16

Free in the Spirit

The Apostle Paul wrote, in 2 Corinthians 3.17, “Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” How could it be otherwise?

The Spirit of God is not bound by sin or the finite limitations of human thought or flesh. The Holy Spirit is not constrained by any inability to know the future, access the wisdom of God, or to exercise His power in accomplishing His purposes. It makes sense that, wherever the Spirit of God is full, overflowing, and exerting His cultivating presence, liberty and fruitfulness would be the order of the day, and the Bride of Christ would be liberated from every hindrance and constraint that keeps her from flourishing as the garden of the Lord.

But what can we expect in those places where the Spirit of God is *not* active and flourishing? Bondage to sin and the limitations of human strength and resources; indifference to matters of truth and eternal consequence; a casual and self-centered approach to seeking the Kingdom of God; and a church that is not pouring forth its bounty to bless its members, its community, and its Lord.

A garden locked, a spring dammed, and a well of life sealed.

Sadly, this is where a great many of our churches are today. They continue going through the motions of worship and ministry, but there is little telling evidence of vital spiritual liberty at work in their midst, freeing them from all self-interest, fear, and indifference to God’s Word and empowering them to turn their communities rightside-up for Jesus Christ.

More of the Spirit

The only way to shatter the locks, burst the dams, and break the seals that keep churches from flourishing as the garden of the Lord is to have more of the Spirit of God present in, with, and through them.

Jesus said that, when the Spirit comes to dwell with us, He will guide us into all Truth, thus setting us free from every hindrance and limitation ((Jn. 16.13; Jn. 8.32). He brings forth the fruit of holiness in us (Gal. 5.22, 23), and all the gifts for ministry we require (1 Cor. 12.7-11). He empowers us for effective witness throughout our communities (Acts 1.8), and He causes us to overflow with refreshing and renewing water of life to everyone with whom we have contact (Jn. 7.37-39).

These things are happening but a little in our day, and this suggests to me that churches need to regain a focus on and renew their pursuit of the Spirit of the Holy God. How do we do this?

Pray for the Spirit

First, by committing the congregation to *pray for the Spirit*. The Lord Jesus promised that, if we will pray for the Spirit, faithfully and continuously, our Father will grant Him to us (Lk. 11.1-13). Pastors must instruct their people in the importance of seeking the Spirit and His filling every day. The service of worship, every Sunday school class, and all the other activities of the church must feature prayer for the Spirit continuously. Thus we will show the Lord that we mean business and earnestly desire to have His promised Spirit more a

part of our lives and ministries.

We can be sure that, since being filled with the Spirit is God's will for us as His people, if we seek the Spirit earnestly in prayer, the Lord will supply Him increasingly.

A welcome dwelling-place

But we also need to make ourselves the kind of *welcome dwelling-place* where the Spirit will feel at home.

This means we need to nurture love for God's Law, since the Law of God is a primary component of the Spirit's disciple-making curriculum (Ezek. 36.26, 27). We must also cultivate the practice of thanksgiving, singing to the Lord and rejoicing in Him at all times, and offering ourselves to one another in ministries of mutual concern and love (Eph. 5.18-21). Since these are evidences of the filling of the Spirit, we must suppose that adorning the garden of our lives with such furnishings will cause His winds to blow more fruitfully within and through us.

And we must earnestly seek the glory of God in all our study of God's Word and in every aspect of our lives. For it is the glory of God that the Spirit uses to transform us increasingly into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

God's Spirit can unlock the fruitfulness of our gardens and undam the waters of spiritual life we require. Only as we earnestly and diligently seek the Spirit can we expect the Wind of God to blow through His garden and spread the fruit and fragrance of Christ from us to the surrounding world.

For reflection

1. Do you pray for the Spirit regularly? Is your "garden" a welcoming presence for the Spirit? Explain.
2. Meditate on Galatians 5.16-23. What is the difference between walking "in the Spirit" and walking "in the flesh"? How can we know which of these we're walking in at any time?
3. Meditate on Ephesians 3.20. Is the Spirit – God's power at work in you – able to make you more fruitful in holiness, spiritual fruit, ministry, and witness? How much more?

Next steps: How might you begin seeking the filling, fruit, and fragrance of the Spirit more consistently in your life each day? Talk with some fellow believers about this question.

5 The Fragrance of Truth and Love

*Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates
With pleasant fruits,
Fragrant benna with spikenard,
Spikenard and saffron,
Calamus and cinnamon,
With all trees of frankincense,
Myrrh and aloes,
With all the chief spices—
A fountain of gardens,
A well of living waters,
And streams from Lebanon.* Song of Solomon 4.13-15

A fragrance of Christ?

The Apostle Paul wrote that the Church is a fragrance of Christ to the world: “For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Cor. 2.15). By this he meant that every believer, and every congregation of believers, establishes a presence of Christ in the world which is palpable to others. Where believers are present, Jesus is present, and the fragrance of His life is real and potent.

Peter wrote the same, saying that the hope we enjoy, the hope of glory, will shine through those who are living in full faith with such clarity that people will be drawn to ask a reason for it (1 Pet. 3.15).

Believers must be mindful that, as the ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we represent Him to the world. We wouldn't think of going to work or school or any social event with our bodies smelling and wreaking of dirt and sweat. We shouldn't go out into the world without making sure that the fragrance of Christ is hanging on us, either. Christ in us is a Tree of spices, a Fountain of gardens, and a Well of living water as we walk in full faith in His Spirit. He is a *real* and *arresting* fragrance to the people around us.

Conforming to Christ

But what is that fragrance? How should we expect others to experience the presence of Jesus in us?

In two ways, primarily: The truth of the Gospel and the love of Jesus Christ.

God's truth speaks to every aspect of human life, all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. The truth of God drives back the darkness of unbelief and allows the new day of Jesus to shine into every place we go and everything we do. By His Word of Truth, in the hands of His Spirit, Christ is making all things new in our lives (Rev. 21.5).

This means that in every area of our lives, Christians exhibit a newness which conforms not to the spirit of the world but to the Holy Spirit of Christ. Our *conversation* will be different – not filled with carping and complaining, triteness and frivolity, gossip and criticism and mean-spiritedness; instead, our words will always be gracious and edifying, respectful of the people with whom we converse (Col. 4.6; Eph. 4.29). And we will always be ready with a word of witness to explain the hope others see in us (1 Pet. 3.15).

So also with the ways we do our work, raise our children, participate in the culture of our day, and conduct ourselves with dignity and grace. Words like decency, dignity, joy, considerateness, excellence, curiosity, kindness, thoroughness, confidence, hope, and so forth will characterize everything we do in life. We are new creatures in Jesus Christ, formed by His Word of truth and, therefore, in many ways, we will be out of step

with the surrounding culture. But by living the truth in every aspect of our lives, we will shine the light of Jesus and exude the fragrance of His worldview into every nook and cranny of our lives.

The love of Christ

Coupled with the love of Christ, this can be a powerful force for the Gospel. The truth we are learning to obey is always lived and spoken in love (Eph. 4.15). Our words may be hard to hear, our lives may stand out as decidedly different, but if we couch and garb them in the self-denying, sacrificial love of Jesus, others will hear and respect our lifestyle, and may even come to want to know more about it (Mic. 4.1-5).

To be sure, not everyone will welcome this fragrance of Truth and love. Paul continued, “To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life.” The truth and love of Jesus will offend some, but that will only be because their spiritual olfactory sense is hardened to the things of the Lord.

Hard work

The life of full faith requires that we work hard at being the fragrance of Jesus. By steeping ourselves in God’s Word, living in an attitude of prayer, and having other believers to encourage, instruct, and correct us, we will strengthen our souls and cultivate the rich potential of our lives for blessing others and honoring the Lord. Thus we may waft the fragrant smell of King Jesus into more of the everyday aspects and areas of our lives, until Jesus fills the all things of our lives with Himself (Eph. 4.8).

The garden of the Lord is filled with the spiritual essences of holy, fruitful, serving, witness-bearing living. Let us resolve to be that fragrance of truth and love, and we will find that the Wind of God’s Spirit will accompany us everywhere we go, sending the aroma of Jesus to all and every, as well as to God.

For reflection

1. How can you tell when you are in the presence of someone who is the fragrance of Jesus?
2. Why should we expect that some people, sensing Jesus in us, might find that to be an aroma of death? How should we respond to them?
3. As you think about your own walk with the Lord, what does it mean for you to “work hard at being the fragrance of Jesus”?

Next steps: Spend an extended season of prayer waiting on the Lord to show you how you might more consistently become the fragrance of Christ in your sphere of influence.

6 The Strength of Unity

*Let my beloved come to his garden
And eat its pleasant fruits...
Eat, O friends!
Drink, yes, drink deeply,
O beloved ones!* Song of Solomon 4.16, 5.1

The beauty of the whole

A church is a congregation of people united together in the love of Christ and devoted to His mission. As the Scriptures repeatedly indicate, a church is like a garden, where the Lord is cultivating luscious fruits, wholesome grains, and wonderful colors and scents to spread abroad for the blessing of the world. Each believer's life is a plant in that garden, which blossoms from a strong soul toward the expectations of the Lord for full faith living. Together, congregations hold enormous potential for wafting the fragrance of the living Christ throughout their communities.

In any garden, the beauty, diversity, and bounty of the whole is much more enthralling, wonderful, and enriching than the fruit of any single plant. So also in the Church. The unity which Christians share with one another – in local congregations and between congregations in any given community – can greatly multiply and enhance the fragrance and fruit of Christ which issues from them.

Jesus taught as much. In John 17.21, He prayed that the members of His Body might be one, because, when they demonstrate that oneness they present a powerful, compelling witness to the watching world.

Churches today are not very much concerned about manifesting oneness in Christ. In Ephesians 4.3 Paul said that believers have to work hard to maintain the unity of the Spirit in bonds of Kingdom peace. It's easy to let people irk and offend us, anger and disappoint us, or give us fodder for gossip or criticism. It's hard work to resist such temptations. It's easy for churches to remain isolated from one another in a community, never worshiping or working together, jealous and competitive, and cutting one another down behind their backs. It's hard work for believers to work together as the garden of the Lord in their community, bringing forth many pleasant fruits for one another and all.

Strive for unity

But the garden of the Lord must strive for unity, both within individual congregations and among the Christ-honoring congregations in any community.

This is hard work. It means we have to go out of our way, break our normal routines, and try some things that might not feel comfortable at first.

In the local church believers must work hard to get to know one another, look for ways to encourage and serve one another, and take care that they don't allow indifference, inconsiderateness, grudges, or unkind criticism to take root in their hearts. Such weeds of sin will surely stifle the full flourishing of the Lord's garden.

At the community level, pastors should seek out one another for prayer and fellowship, discover ways of bringing their congregations together for worship and service to the community, and respect one another's acts of discipline against recalcitrant members. It's when the people in our communities *see* such evident oneness that they will detect the fragrance of Christ and be drawn – many of them – to the Lord and His garden.

Toward unity

As I said, this is hard work, and not the sort of thing that gets much urging or attention from church leaders.

But consider what's at stake: Our witness for Jesus suffers when we allow our congregations and the churches in our community to continue going their own way, giving but lip-service to the idea of Christian unity. Where are the believers who will use their gifts and strength to bring about greater unity among the members of their churches? Where are the pastors who will take Jesus at His Word and submit to the hard work Paul mentioned in order to lead their congregations and churches to achieve real and visible unity in Christ?

The sooner such believers step forward, the sooner everyone will be able to enjoy more of the rich banquet of spiritual fruit the churches have to offer.

Where to begin? In the local church, we must teach members about the importance and practice of unity, sponsor meaningful opportunities for fellowship, and establish a ministry of shepherding for watching over the souls of all the members of the church. In the community, let pastors spend time together and begin praying together regularly. Plan a service of joint worship involving several congregations. Develop a common resource pool for ministering to the poor. Plan an outreach activity that will get all the churches involved in bringing the Gospel to the community.

No, we don't see this happening very much, because, yes, such unity is hard work. But the payoff for liberating the garden of the Lord to flourish in fragrance and fruit is very great, indeed.

We have the Word of our Lord on it.

For reflection

1. In what ways does your church work to create greater unity among its members?
2. Do the churches in your community try to make their unity visible in any ways? Can you think of some ways they might do so?
3. Paul said we must "work hard" at such unity (Eph. 4.3). Why do you suppose we don't?

Next steps: Talk with a pastor or church leader about how your church might begin working harder at unity, both in the church and among the churches in the community.

7 The Joy and Beauty of the Earth

*How fair is your love,
My sister, my spouse!
How much better than wine is your love,
And the scent of your perfumes
Than all spices!* Song of Solomon 4.10

A problem of vision

Many churches today suffer from a lack of vision.

Or perhaps I should say they suffer from having *too small* a vision.

Consider the way churches advertise themselves in the papers or on their outside marquis: “The Family Church” or “The Place for You” or “Growing Together in the Lord.” These are just a few of the many church slogans I’ve seen over the years, which are meant to declare to any who may be interested just what this church stands for and hopes to achieve.

Now having a church where families are welcome, people can find a place to grow and serve, and new friendships can be forged is not a bad thing. It’s just that these aren’t sufficient to describe the vision of the Church which the Lord Himself holds out for His Bride. His vision for the Church is much more compelling – and more alluring – than all of these mottos rolled together.

As the Lord sees His Bride, she is both a sign and outpost of the Kingdom of God.

An Old Testament image

The New Testament is not reluctant to identify the Church with Israel, Jerusalem, and Zion from the Old Testament (cf. Heb. 12.22-24). Thus the New Testament teaches us to draw on those passages in the Old Testament that can help us in discovering the Lord’s vision for the Church.

Take, for example, Psalm 48.1, 2. Here the Church is described as *beautiful* in elevation and the *joy* of the whole earth. Jesus picked up on the idea of the Church being elevated as a desirable habitation in Matthew 5. He said His followers would be a city set on a hill. He intended, moreover, that the beauty of the Lord should shine forth from the Church so that all the world could see the glory of God and give Him praise and thanks (Matt. 5.13-16). So it seems that part of our vision for the Church should be that we strive to become a place of beauty before the eyes of our neighbors.

In Jesus’ view of the Kingdom, the Church is central (cf. Matt. 16.18). We need to learn what it means for our churches to *sign* the Kingdom – to advertise and display its presence – and to be *outposts* for it in our communities – communities that bring beauty and joy to their neighbors.

Looking beyond ourselves

Something is beautiful when it brings us delight, and not just once, but over and over. Our churches will be beautiful in the eyes of our communities when we offer them things that bring them joy, wellbeing, personal enrichment, and peace in their souls. In times past, and in many cases still today, churches used their facilities to serve the needs of the local community. They offered themselves in service to the poor and needy, the downcast and troubled, and to those beset by crisis or emergency. You can be sure that people will delight in our churches and find them beautiful when, in a variety of ways, we make it a point to bring help and hope to our neighbors.

Joy couples readily with delight. Are the people in your community happy that your church is located there? To what can they point in order to tell a new neighbor that this is a church that has the needs and interests of the community in mind? When was the last time your church did anything for the sake of bringing joy into your community?

We need bigger visions for our churches – Kingdom visions. We need to see our churches as cities on a hill, where the Word of God is taught and embraced, all the individual plants in our garden are flourishing and bearing fruit, and the benefits and blessings of the living Christ are wafting throughout our community, leading many to seek the Lord and His garden (cf. Mic. 4.1-8).

As the garden of the Lord, local churches, together with the churches in the community, must consider what will be required for them to be flowing fountains and wells of beauty and joy to their community. Each community will differ, and no church will want to compromise its Kingdom calling just to satisfy the whims of unsaved neighbors. But there is still much that churches can do – if only they had the vision for it – to extend a hand of truth and love, gloved in beauty and joy, to help their communities know more of the reality of the living Christ.

The garden of the Lord, and all the plants in that garden, hold the seeds of hope for the life of the world. Let us work to unlock these blessings, undam the waters of life, and unseal the springs of hope for the people to whom God has sent us.

For reflection

1. What is your church's vision for its ministry?
2. What does it mean to say that the church is a *sign* and *outpost* of the Kingdom of God?
3. "But there is still much that churches can do – if only they had the vision for it – to extend a hand of truth and love, gloved in beauty and joy, to help their communities know more of the reality of the living Christ." What's one thing your church might do in this regard?

Next steps: What is your church's vision, and how do leaders use that vision for bringing the fruit and fragrance of Christ to your community? Ask some church leaders about this.

Plants in the Garden of the Lord

For reflection or discussion

1. How is the local church like a garden, a fountain and a well?
2. What keeps local churches from flourishing for the Lord in their communities?
3. The flourishing of individual “plants” in the garden depends, in no small part, on the proper cultivation of the “garden” as a whole. Explain.
4. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned about being a plant in the garden of the Lord?
5. How are you planning to implement that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Prayer:

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