

Not Improving on our Instructions: the Mission of the Church

Captain MacWhirr did not try to improve upon his instructions. We meet Captain MacWhirr in the pages of a Joseph Conrad novel called *Typhoon*. MacWhirr is a peculiar and pleasing character, and I would enjoy telling you about him, and about *Typhoon*, but I will limit myself.

He did not try to improve upon his instructions. MacWhirr was a sailing ship's captain, and worked for a company that owned merchant ships. The company had a new ship built, which they prized; and of their many captains, management decided to appoint MacWhirr its captain, because, in their words, you knew he would not try to improve upon his instructions.

Apparently the company had other captains who tried to improve on their instructions. Management found these captains a disappointment. So the new ship goes to MacWhirr.

What would occupy our churches, if we did not try to improve upon our instructions? If we read all that the NT said to churches, and made some real effort to do all that churches were instructed to do, and to leave aside the rest, how would that look?

I am talking about the letters here, letters to the churches, everything from the end of Acts to the end of the NT. I assume that the NT letters are the apostles and other writers applying the life and teachings of Christ to the churches. If we want to know what Christ and the Gospels mean for local churches, we will find that in the NT letters.

If we approached our lives as followers of Christ with the same straightforward simplicity as MacWhirr approached sailing, what would mark our lives? I am going to present five options to you, and then evaluate them in importance, based on our instructions.

I attended Bible College, right after high school, and there I was taught three Christian priorities, One, the importance of a private devotional life, primarily prayer and reading Scripture; two, to love one another, a common shared life of encouraging and serving other believers, and three, evangelism, regularly speaking about Christ and the gospel to unbelievers around us.

I will add two more that I did not hear about when I was a young man, but hear them now.

Four, meeting the material needs of the world around us, taking care of the hungry and thirsty and poor and sick. And five, working for justice, and defending the world's oppressed people.

The first of these five is private and individual, our personal spiritual disciplines. The second is within the community of Christ's followers, serving and taking care of each other. Third and fourth and fifth are all aimed outward: 3, evangelism: 4, helping the world's needy people; and 5, and working for justice in the world.

Will you turn to Acts 2 please? The end of Acts chapter 2. Suppose you listed these five topics on a sheet of paper, and read through the NT Letters, from the beginning of Romans to the end of the NT, and suppose you put a check mark on your paper whenever you came to a command or an urging about any one of these five priorities. I will tell you what you would find.

You would find almost all of your check marks beside one of these five, and the other four priorities would more or less be ignored. Based on our instructions, one of these is the overwhelming emphasis, and to the others the NT letters are surprisingly indifferent.

The clear instruction is this: to love one another, a common shared life of encouraging and serving other believers.

Acts 2:42 In one day about 3,000 people repent and are baptized in Jesus' name and receive the Holy Spirit. What do their lives look like?

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers [at the Temple].⁴³ Everyone [in Jerusalem] was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common.⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone of them who had need.⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The biggest thing that changed for these 3,000 was their life together. They met in their homes and in the temple courts, they ate together, they prayed together, they sold their possessions to help each other, they listened to the apostles' teaching, they enjoyed their meals together, they praised God together.

There is not a word in here about their private lives. I'm sure private lives changed, but that's not mentioned. There is nothing in here about any kind of outreach. There probably was some, but no mention of helping those outside, or speaking the gospel. The apostles continued to preach, but not the 3,000.

They enjoyed the favour of all the people around them in Jerusalem and Judea. The others saw how these 3000 lived together, were surprised and impressed. It was the way the believers treated God and each other that caught the attention of the watching world. And by this means, the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." This is exactly the thinking behind this church life summary at the end of Acts 2.

Now the end of Acts 2 is just one paragraph, and not even in the NT letters. I read it to you because all the letters assume life together to be the priority of the church. That kind of glowing intensity did not last. It was like that only in Jerusalem, and even there only near the beginning.

Nevertheless, all the NT letters assume the church to be a new society, God's alternative society. This alternative society worships Jesus of Nazareth as the Lord of the universe, and these people live as a society of servants to each other, helping each other, forgiving each other, eating together, urging each other to obey Christ, encouraging and building up each other.

Our instructions are to be such a society within the world, and we do not grasp how much the world needs to see that, and how effectively the Holy Spirit will work to make sure they see this.

In the letters, the purpose of this life together is not to call the world, or improve the world, or even to show the world the one thing it needs to see. We do accomplish these to some extent, but that's not why we live this way. The real goal of this life together is to love God and bring glory to God. We live this way to please Christ and to serve Christ, because Jesus is Lord.

Understand my purpose here. I do not mean to discourage any of those five priorities. Of course they are not wrong, they are all good and noble. I do think we can miss the simplicity of our instructions, and I would like to refresh that. Now, let's briefly go over the five priorities I listed at the start.

1, Private Devotional Life. All believers need to be praying to God, and need Scripture familiarity to guide them. For some this happens best privately, and for others prayer and Scripture only come alive in the group. These are both good, neither is better than the other.

This is uncomfortable for me, because Scripture leads me to say what I do not want to say. Here is what I must say: the Letters do NOT call us or urge us to have regular private devotions. The preachers said to read the Bible, so I did, and found out that the Bible does not say to read the Bible.

I find private prayer and Scripture reading essential for carrying on as a follower of the Lord, not every day, but certainly most days. I do not know how I'd survive without it. On the other hand, there are people who love the Lord and are led by the Spirit and who serve God faithfully, and scheduled private prayer and Scripture DO NOT work for those people, and never will. NEVER feel like you have disappointed God by not having a regular private devotional life.

A reason this troubles me is that biblical literacy in our churches is dismal. There needs to be a group of people in the church who read the whole Scripture attentively. Not just the favorite parts, but the whole Scripture, some people who can function like a compass in the church. Too few leaders do this. Still, regular private devotions are not a biblical call. No check marks there.

2, Love Each Other. Rm 12: *Be devoted to one another in love. Love must be sincere. Honour one another above yourselves. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Live in harmony with each other.* Rm 13: *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves fulfills the law* (from the 2nd great command, love neighbour as self).

Rm 14 *Accept the one who is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. Stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not destroy someone for whom Christ died. Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and to building each other up.*

Rm 15 *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each one of us ought to please our neighbour for their good, to build them up, for even Christ did not please himself. Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*

These are most of the instructions Romans 12-15. If I were to read all the instructions of that kind in the rest of the NT letters, we'd be here a long time. Our second priority, love one another, will have many check marks after it.

And you can tell here that these people share life together. Showing up one hour a week on the Lord's day, to sing songs and listen to a sermon, that's thin church. Scripture assumes thick church. Not multiple church services, but living life together, sharing God and life.

We can tell from the Romans Scriptures I just read that there are some unity problems in that church. There are unity problems because there's a considerable shared life together. We cannot have thick church, strong vigorous church life, if there is not shared life.

3, Evangelism. The Lord sends workers into his harvest fields, that is, the Lord chooses some from the church and gives them the gift of evangelism and sends them out. The churches pray for these preachers, partner with them financially, and treat them hospitably when they are in town.

But evangelism is not the mission of the church, or the call to individual believers. I just read to you about fifteen clear instructions, to the church at Rome, on our life together. In all the letters, there is not one clear instruction telling believers to speak to their neighbour about Christ, or to proclaim the gospel.

The letters do not urge outreach of any kind. This topic is also uncomfortable to me, because in the NT, God has a great interest in the gospel of Jesus Christ going to those who have not heard. Acts often mentions impressive church growth. But church growth never means that a church or a preacher was obedient; it always shows the power of the gospel and of the Holy Spirit.

The apostles and other writers to the churches care little if that church is growing, shrinking, or staying the same size. They never mention whether or not new people believe and come to the Lord. For the apostles, these are not the measurement of a church's faithfulness to the Lord. There are a few debated verses. There may be a few checkmarks here, but not many.

4. Taking Care of the World's Needy People. Every collection mentioned in Acts was for believers in need. Every call to financial generosity in the letters aims the money toward believers, the church's poor, the church's leaders, or those who preach the gospel. There is not one call or one urging in the letters to take care of the world's poor around us.

The second great command, "love your neighbour as yourself," occurs three times in the letters, Romans and Galatians and James, and each time the neighbour is another believer.

This is not exclusive. We read in Galatians, "*As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers.*" Here's another typical instruction about those outside the church: *Remind the people to (1) be subject to rulers and authorities, (2) to be obedient, (3) to be ready to do whatever is good [which will include material help], (4) to slander no one, (5) to be peaceable, (6) and considerate, (7) and always be gentle to everyone.*

As we have opportunity, do good to all people. Be ready to do whatever is good [for anyone] (Tts). May your love increase for each other *and for everyone else* (1 Thess). In our instructions, good things do go out from God's people to everyone. Our church is in its 3rd year of helping a Muslim refugee family from Syria.

But the language of the letters about taking care of believers in need is much stronger than this. In James and in John, if we don't help believers in need, we ourselves are not children of God.

5. Working for Justice, Freedom for the World's Oppressed. John the Baptist told King Herod that Herod should not have taken his brother's wife. Herod put John in prison. Jesus was in the area. Did Jesus tell Herod that Herod should not have put John in prison? No, Jesus left Judea and went to Galilee, and that's when his ministry began.

Some time later Herod executed John. When Jesus found out, did he then go to Herod and say, you should not have executed John? No, when Jesus found out, he withdrew privately to a solitary place. I have heard Jesus described as a champion for the oppressed, but I cannot see it.

Jesus certainly treated people justly, and he treated all as equals. The Gospels make a point of showing Jesus' respectful treatment of those that society ignored or rejected. Jesus taught us to treat others with respect. But he did not chase down oppressors, or teach us to do so. His words were more like: Blessed are the meek, they will inherit the earth. Again: Jesus did not challenge oppressors, and he did not try to change the system.

The NT does mention three cries for justice, each teaching that God's people respond to injustice by crying out to God for justice, and that God answers this prayer. The first is from Jesus: *Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.* (Luke 18)

James 5 - *You rich people! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. Weep and wail because of the misery coming to you [rich people who do this].*

Revelation 6, 5th seal – martyrs now in God's presence call out in a loud voice: *“How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” They were given a white robe, and told to wait a little longer.* (The 6th seal answers.)

Does God care about justice? Absolutely yes. Does injustice infuriate God? Yes! Does it follow that his children should work tirelessly for a just world? No, that did not occur to Jesus or his apostles and the other writers. These cries for justice are all prayers directed to God, and each Scripture promises that God hears such prayers and responds with justice.

Justice. Believers in Corinth were cheating each other in business deals, and then taking each other to the world's courts for justice. Paul was dismayed. He said these things should be sorted out in the church, not the world. But he also tells them this: *“To want justice from one another at all is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?”*

Well! I have many reasons why I would rather not be wronged or cheated, but apparently, when I came to Christ, I left those reasons behind on the shore, along with my boats and nets.

Private devotional life, evangelism, helping the world's needy, working for a just world: these are obviously noble goals, but according our instructions, these are all quite secondary.

Once in a while it is good to review our instructions. Our instructions have little concern for these things. Let's be cautious about trying to improve on our instructions, as if we understand serving Christ better than his delegates did.

Let's review the emphasis of our instructions: the church will worship Jesus of Nazareth as the saviour and judge of the world, and the Lord of the universe, and we will live as a society of servants to each other, helping each other, forgiving each other, eating together, urging each other to obey Christ, encouraging and building each other up.

According to our instructions, our purpose is not to call the world, or improve the world, or show the world what it needs to see, though we do accomplish all of these. Our purpose is to love God and bring glory to God. We live this way in order to serve Christ, because Jesus is Lord. Amen.