

OUR GOAL: A UNIFIED CHURCH

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For many, the beginning of a new year is a time of introspection—a time to evaluate the previous year and a time to set goals for the new one. It seems that the ending of 2020 is certainly a time for introspection, as this year brought us through many difficult and challenging times. For some, this has been a year filled with loss; for many, it has been a year filled with uncertainty and anxiety. Truly, this year brought many of us through things we thought we would never have to experience.



As a result, 2020 has been a year marked by division. This year has brought us heated disagreements on politics, infectious diseases, and everything in between. These disagreements did not stop in 2020, however. Even in 2021, we still will have disagreements over topics such as elections, vaccines, and wearing masks. Perhaps what is most troubling is that these disagreements seem to be sticking around for at least the near future; however, the disputes and disagreements of this world really should not surprise us as Christians, as the world has always been a source of confusion and disagreement.

Despite being part of a divided world, Christians must make sure they are part of a unified church. As Christians, we must be diligent in making sure that the divisions of the world do not carry over into the church. Even though 2020 was a tough year, we can still use it for our own benefit if we can learn from it. Perhaps the biggest lesson from 2020 was that the church must be unified.

We have seen the damage that a divided country can cause, and we know that a

divided church can also be damaging. Further, a divided church is not what God wants nor expects from His people. From the first century all the way to the twenty-first century, there is no excuse for a divided church. Yes, even in the most polarizing times—even in particularly difficult years such as 2020—the church must be unified. The question arises, though: how can we accomplish this goal?

Unity is accomplished in the church, at least in part, through having the right knowledge, which is based on the word of God (consider **1 Corinthians 1:10**). To be united, congregations must have God's word front and center. Divided churches are the product of placing human wisdom and earthly ideas above God's word. Beyond this idea, though, brethren must understand that unity is a noble thing—something that is pleasing in the sight of God (**Psalms 133:1**). We should not, however, stop here. Unity is not just a virtue; instead, it is a commandment (**1 Peter 3:8-9**). When we view a unified church as both a necessity and a commandment, we likely will make more efforts toward being unifying people. After all, the decision to live a unifying and peaceable life starts with each individual (**Romans 12:18**).

As Christians, our hope is to do our part in the great commission by making as many disciples as we possibly can (**Matthew 28:18-20**). In fulfilling our duties, we try to present the lost with the many blessings that come from being in fellowship with God. Being a part of a unified body of believers—that is, the Lord's church—is among these great blessings. After a year like 2020, many people are left looking for answers. Indeed, many are searching for the peace, calm, and stillness that this world cannot offer.

This new year let us endeavor to make sure that the lost can see a unified church and have a desire to learn more. Let us endeavor to show the lost that the Lord

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and His church offer a reprieve from the division, argumentation, and fighting of this world. This goal starts with you and me, but it takes all of us. It is a difficult task at times, but it is a noble task that the Lord expects us to complete. May God bless the Lord's church this new year, and may He bless us all as we seek to live in harmony with each other.

WHEN OUR KINGS PASS ON

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Alexander Graham Bell once wrote, "When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us."

If there ever were a year about which we would longingly and regretfully dwell on the past rather than moving forward, it would be this past year of 2020. For many, the heartbreak of 2020 hovers like a dark cloud. The loss of friends, family, and church leaders has many dwelling on the past, wondering "What now?" Our answer, thankfully, is not far away.



Being tasked with filling the gap left by a leader who "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" is a burden God's people have grappled with since the time of Isaiah and King Uzziah (Isaiah 6). The king, while not perfect, has a reign marked by his faithfulness to the Lord. And it is at the king's death that Isaiah begins his famous ministry. Isaiah 6 answers our question about what to do when 'kings pass on.'

First, Isaiah looks up. Tragedy strikes; and, without earthly leadership, Isaiah turns his gaze toward heaven. **Isaiah 6:1** immediately transitions from the loss of their king to Isaiah's perspective: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne." The Lord offers hope in times of trouble and distress through His continual presence. While those around us may have passed on, it is the Lord God who still watches over us.

David also finds comfort in God; in fact, it is the ever-present nature of God that makes the valley of the shadow of death bearable (**Psalms 23**). Keeping a

heavenly perspective is the only way we as Christians will overcome earthly heartaches. Paul reminds us that this world offers many afflictions, but the key to success is to keep our attention on heaven. As we go through life's valleys, we must remember to look upward.

Second, Isaiah looks at himself. As he sets his attention on the Lord, he also turns that attention upon himself. Seeing all of his inadequacies, Isaiah says, "Woe is me, for I am undone!" (**Isaiah 6:4**). And we can sympathize with Isaiah's depiction of himself. Instead of crumbling, he prepares himself (**Isaiah 6:6-7**).

As we look at the roles left for us to fill, we often feel inadequate; but like Isaiah, we cannot crumble under the weight of what the church needs; instead, we must prepare ourselves to stand in the gap left by our godly leaders. Jesus outlines our preparation process in **Matthew 7**: He calls us to prepare ourselves by removing any plank from our eyes so that we may help others.

Jesus also teaches what Isaiah exemplifies; we cannot let our shortcomings and weaknesses hinder us from doing the work of the Lord. We may never become leaders like those who have gone on before us, but may we be encouraged to realize they would never have become the leaders they were had they not prepared themselves for the work. Let us today prepare ourselves to be the Christians our congregations and families need.

Finally, having set his attention on God and having prepared himself for work, Isaiah volunteers. As God looks around for someone to teach His word, Isaiah steps up to the plate, saying, "Here am I! Send me" (**Isaiah 6:8**). The courage to step up is often missing in our lives. But the only way for the church to continue to grow is for God's people, those who have their attention set on God and have prepared their lives for service, to step up and be the Christians God calls us to be.

As we look back on the year 2020, every Christian has a decision to make: Do we remain stagnant in the presence of sorrow, or do we, like Isaiah, challenge ourselves to keep our attention on God, prepare ourselves for work, and step up to help? As we move into a new year, our resolve must be to turn our attention to God, prepare ourselves for God's work, and boldly say, "Here I am, send me."



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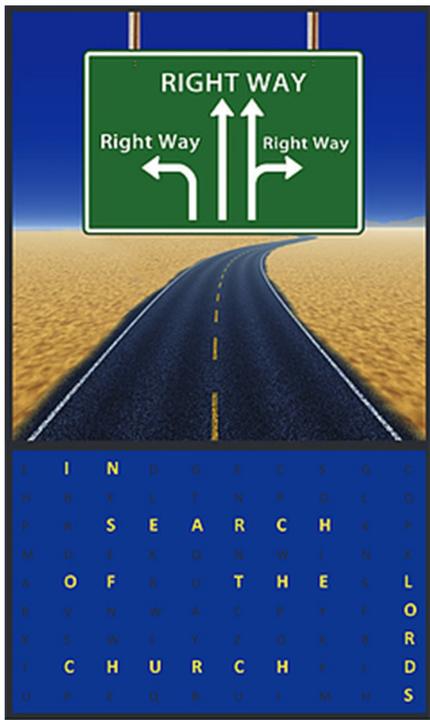
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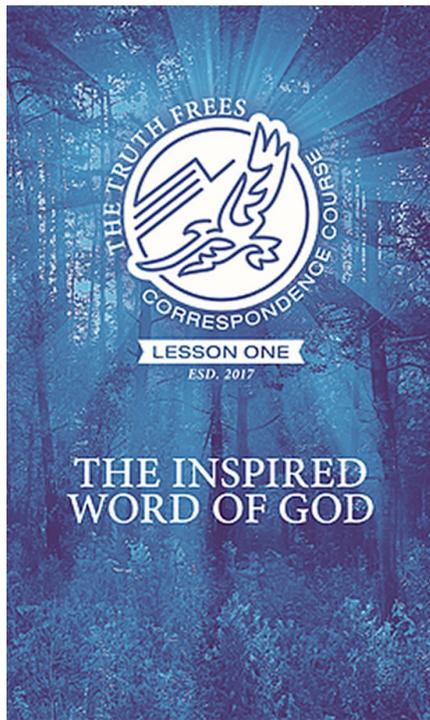
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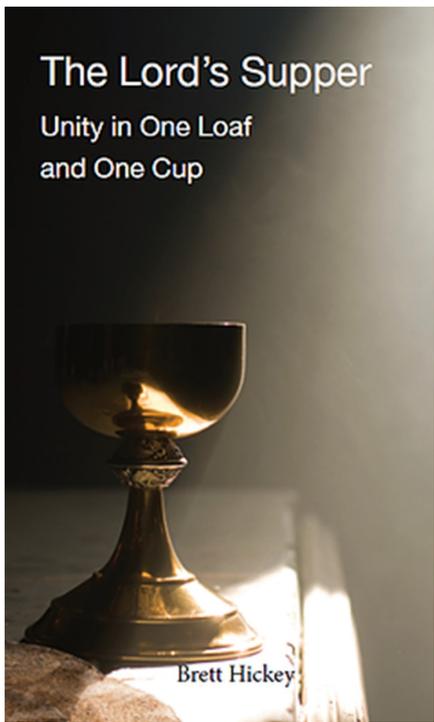
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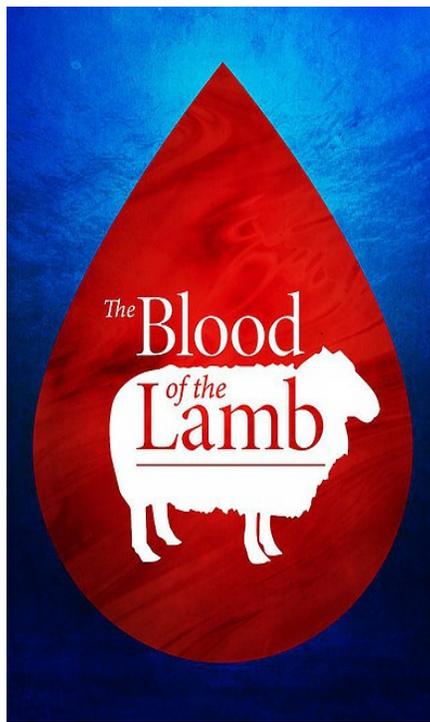
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