



# GATHERED

*The Empowered Presence of God's People*

**TEACHER NOTES & DISCUSSION GUIDE**

SESSION ONE: **The Outpost of Heaven**

*A Study on the Church by*



**SMYRNAFIRST**  
BAPTIST CHURCH



# Session One

## THE OUTPOST OF HEAVEN

### I. Introduction

At the end of the Great War in 1918, France began to look for ways to fortify her borders against the aggression of neighboring Germany which had just failed at invading. The answer was envisioned by the French Minister of War, André Maginot, as a line of concrete fortifications, obstacles, and weapons installations that ran along the entire French border with Germany. The Maginot Line, built in the 1930's, was praised as a military marvel and it proved effective in keeping the Germans from mounting a direct invasion of France in World War II. However, on May 10, 1940, Germany would repeat a march over the Belgian border, completely bypassing the famed Maginot Line and quickly taking control of the region, positioning itself to invade France. By June 14, Paris had fallen to the Germans and Hitler's grip over Europe tightened.

The Maginot Line was a marvel of engineering and military strength, a novel defense unlike anything the world had seen before. But in the end, it proved completely useless against the strategy of a German-Italian alliance. The greater force of France's military perched on the German border. When Italy invaded to the south against depleted French resources and Germany skillfully maneuvered around the Maginot Line, France was caught having to defend their country both in the north and the south. This proved impossible. We all know Hitler would eventually be defeated, but the Maginot Line stands to this day not as a symbol of military strength, but as an embarrassing failure to secure and protect France.

There are some parallels to be found between the famed Maginot Line and the modern church in America. In his book *Retro Christianity*, Michael Svigel says, "...evangelicalism spent over a century building up its fortifications.... To hold the line, they set guards on the borders of biblical inerrancy and secured the doctrines that directly related to the gospel message of salvation by grace through faith. ...But in the process of fortifying obvious points of direct attacks, they neglected their heritage in the ancient and Reformation eras."<sup>1</sup>

The church in the United States is begin attacked on two fronts as well. Besieged by a torrent of doctrinal attacks, the culture demands she conform to the secular worldview that has become pervasive in politics and culture. On a different front, as church membership wanes<sup>2</sup>, congregations are scrambling to discover what will attract people back to the pews and keep their interest, resulting in a staggering division of practices in ministry and worship. So, while orthodox theological principles are eroded away, the practice of the church becomes more and more consumer driven. The results are brutally sad, with a 30% rise in those citing no religious affiliation over the last decade.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. church finds herself in uncharted territory as she now operates in the background of cultural life, no longer influencing culture, but rather being influenced by it.

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<sup>1</sup> Svigel, Michael J., *Retro Christianity: Reclaiming the Forgotten Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Jeffery M. "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades," Gallup, April 18, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An update on America's changing religious landscape," Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

But it actually gets worse. In addition to the external forces at work, the church actually finds herself involved in a civil war as well, with a widening gap between generations that only seems to be growing as the external forces of culture and theological erosion drive a wedge between them.<sup>4</sup> This makes sense only if the church as a whole is beginning to devalue the authority of Scripture, lose doctrinal fidelity, and as a result begins to look to culture for relevancy. In this case, all parties will retreat from a single biblical standard and embrace a cultural standard that feels best to them. As anecdotal evidence, you can see this shift from church unity in the rampant attempt to appeal to generational tastes in music during worship services; splintering the church into cells devoted to their own preferences.

So what is the church to do? Is it hopeless? Absolutely not!

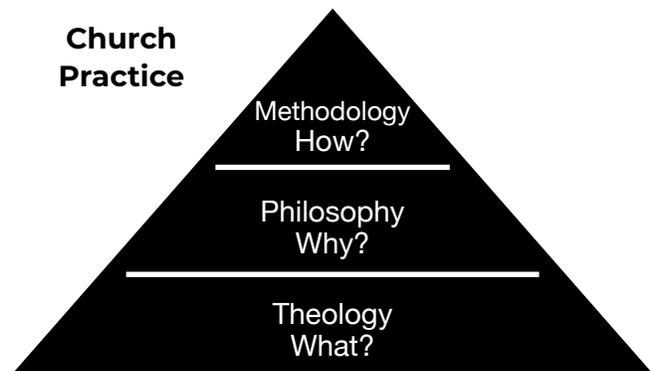
Jesus said that the gates of hell will never prevail against the church (Matthew 16:18). God has called a people for himself out of the world (1 Peter 2:9), the beginnings of an eternal kingdom that will reign forever (Revelation 11:15). Furthermore, we told that Jesus will always lead us in victory (2 Corinthians 2:14) and that God’s Word will always be effective in its work (Isaiah 55:11). Therefore, if we believe the Bible, we should have every confidence that the God who started this great work will be faithful to bring it to full completion (Philippians 1:6). And here is where this study will begin.

The aim of this study is to bring alignment with the biblical testimony of what a church is and does. Over the next 12 weeks, we will examine the marks of the true church, the mission of the true church, and the practices of the true church. God did not leave us without a defense. Instead, he gave us something to return to over and over again as a plumb line to how we are to live and work as his people within a world hostile to God and to his Christ.

This week, we will look at two standards for life and practice, where to drop our anchor, and begin building a theological foundation for the church. You are an ambassador for Christ, enlisted by him as a representative, and deployed in this outpost of heaven. His true church isn’t bothered in the slightest by the advance of earthly or supernatural powers. Rather, we exist as the empowered people of God from every nation, tribe, and tongue; filled with his Spirit, bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ into the world, and living in the hope of glory!

### I. The Standard Practice

The standard by which we measure our lives as the church is extremely important. Just as a builder must follow specifications and do things in the proper order, the church is likewise bound to a standard. **As it relates to our practice of ministry, it is helpful to think of it in three layers: theological, philosophical, and methodological.**



- **Theology** - The base of our practice serves as the foundation. Whatever else is built on this will be shaped and informed by it. Theology must be the foundation for our practice. Without it, we become shifty and unmoored and will be “blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14). Church practice that is not structured first by theology will be

<sup>4</sup> “Generation Z and Morality: What Teens Believe (So Far),” Barna, October 9, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-morality/>



infantile and never become mature. Theology grounds us in defining the foundational truths upon which we then develop and apply Christian ministry and life.

- **Philosophy** - Our philosophy of church practice is built upon theology. It answers the question why? Think of our philosophy as the fleshing out of our theology. It probes, tests, and interacts with theology in a way that points us in the right direction and gives us proper aims.
- **Methodology** - Our methods of church practice are where the rubber really meets the road. This is where theology becomes intensely practical and is applied to the lives of the church. Methodology is highly fluid in many cases and can be contextualized in ways that our theology and philosophy cannot. The “how” of ministry is different around the globe and often what communicates well in one culture doesn’t do so well in another. If the theological foundation is strong and the philosophical work is solid, then the methods of church practice will likely fall into place in a biblically faithful way.

We will revisit this triangle over the course of the study as we think biblically about building our church practices, so it will become more clear over time. As a starting point, just remember that there are **two basic standards** that the church has followed through the years: **cultural standards and biblical standards**. These standards are not mutually exclusive, as they do influence each other. It is, however, very important that we understand what our standard is and orient it correctly or we could end up hurt or angry over decisions made in the church because we are more committed to our own preferences or plans than submitted to God’s plan.

Only one of these standards will carry authority. The one that carries authority will govern the other. If we recognize culture as authoritative, then the Bible will serve the culture. But if the Bible is our authority, then culture will serve the Bible. You can probably see where I’m going with this, but let’s look at both.

#### **A. Cultural Standards for the Church**

Cultural standards are based on the intellectual and artistic creations of mankind. These standards *trend* toward the lowest forms of religious life because they will inevitably drift away from the Bible in pursuit of what is deemed more culturally relevant or useful. Cultural standards can sometimes reflect the best of biblical practice, but when used as the primary standard of church practice, they will always lead us away from the Bible.

1. **Theology of the Cultural Standard** - When the culture is our standard, the church eventually adopt a warped theology of God. Today’s culture has brought us to a religious system which has been named **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**<sup>5</sup>. So named in the 21st century, this system of belief teaches us to live a good and moral life characterized by kindness and deep individuality. It makes room for a god, but only a god who rewards all people at the end of life with heaven.
2. **Philosophy of the Cultural Standard** - This leads us to adopt a philosophy that is **man-centered**. If our theology teaches us that god exists to make us happy and reward us at the end of our lives, then our ministry and church life will reflect practices that have man as the center, seeking to please man rather than God.
3. **Methodology of the Cultural Standard** - The methods of the church will naturally become fixated on that which is most desirable to the culture, eventually becoming not much more than **entertainment for the autonomous church member**. Ministry

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<sup>5</sup> Mohler, R. Albert Jr., “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism - The New American Religion”, Albert Mohler, April 11, 2005, <https://albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2/>

cannot rise above what the church member wants or desires, and only they can define what that means. There ultimately exists no other standard than themselves.

**Examples of Cultural Standards** in the church include:

- *Patriotic Worship Services*<sup>6</sup> - We have sometimes allowed elements never mentioned in the Bible to become essential elements to our perception of right worship.
- *Sunday School* - This example is here to show that some cultural standards have turned out for the proper expression of church work. Sunday school is never mentioned in the Bible either, but it is a cultural system that facilitates discipleship, ministry, and community (all biblical standards).
- *LGBTQ inclusion as members* - This is a negative example of how the culture can drive the church not only away from the biblical standard, but eventually into sin; receiving as Christians those who have no desire to follow Christ in obedience.

Culture is a beautiful expression of God's image-bearing people *if* it serves the unchanging standard of God's Word. If it becomes the authoritative standard, then all the potential beauty of it is destroyed in its pursuit of self. So, it needs the biblical standard to remain in authority so that it can have the fullest and best expression of itself.

## B. Biblical Standards for the Church

Biblical standards are based solely on the Word of God, breathed out by God, inspired and full of unchanging truth and passed down through the ages by faithful people. These standards do not shift with time or preference, but remain forever since they are expressions of God's perfect and unchanging nature. Biblical standards are the blueprint for all life as we know it. They always lead humanity toward repentance and alignment with the teachings of the Bible.

1. **Theology of the Biblical Standard** - The center of biblical theology is **the glory of God**. This puts God's desires, God's purposes, God's delights, and God's plans at the center of life and sees them as the highest good to which any person can attain.
2. **Philosophy of the Biblical Standard** - This leads to a philosophy that is **Christ-centered**. As the only redeemer of mankind, Jesus is the object of our faith, praise, worship, and discipleship. Everything we do in the church should point to him.
3. **Methodology of the Biblical Standard** - This means then that our methodology will be **Spirit-empowered**. I really don't want this to sound hyper-spiritual, so let me explain. Methods are often pragmatic. However, a biblical standard calls for methods that are beyond what we can do on our own. We need help to employ the methods of Scripture. If you can see methodology from this perspective, you'll have done a lot to reorient your thinking about church ministry and life.

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<sup>6</sup> I know that after a largely negative description of cultural standards, this may seem pejorative. It is not meant to be. I recognize that many people find deep value in celebrating the United States of America during a Sunday morning worship service. I have deep patriotic feelings, but would rather express those in a setting outside of the formal worship of the church. My only point is that patriotic-themed worship services are not a biblical practice, but a cultural one rising out of our shared cultural heritage as a nation. God's Word never speaks of the inclusion of any national praise as part of church's worship. Instead, he speaks of all nations as temporary and who will one day be defeated. For a short article on how the church should limit such expressions in worship (which is my personal view), read Dr. Ed Stetzer's blog post at Christianity Today (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2017/august/patriotism-and-church-is-it-too-much-to-ask-churches-to-be.html>).



### Examples of Biblical Standards

- *Preaching and Teaching the Bible* - We'll explore the centrality of the Bible in the life of the church next week, but suffice it to say, you cannot have a biblical ministry without it.
- *Mercy Ministry* - Extending grace to the needy in the form of physical blessings is a hallmark of Christian life. The biblical church will always be a place full of compassion for others, especially those who are oppressed, hopeless, wounded, and tired.
- *Regenerate Church Membership* - Possibly one of the most embarrassing omissions of the modern American church is the incredibly low bar we hold for membership. The biblical standard calls us to welcome members but only if they are in Christ. It is the norm today for many churches to simply accept people into membership despite the lack of solid fruitful evidence of conversion in their lives. The biblical standard calls us to care about and uphold a regenerate church.

In order to see the church as God does, we must begin to reorder our priorities around a biblical standard. When the culture around us becomes merely a tool to use in the witness and discipleship of the local church instead of the driving force of our identity and center of our ministries, then we can begin to see our gathered body and the work we do with fresh eyes and a new vision.

Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus that it would be “through the church” that the “manifold wisdom of God might be made known” (Ephesians 3:10). That isn't the best case scenario. That is how God ordained to make himself known in the world. If the church moves away from God's standard, we cannot hope to accomplish anything.

## II. Dropping the Anchor

Many modern churches often hold to a cultural standard which means their ministries are always shifting, leaving members and the secular world around her scratching their heads. The ever changing nature of ministry leaves churches always trying to find the next big thing or plan for the next big event. This often means we are also compromising the message of the gospel and the form of worship given to us by God in order to try to keep up with the trends. The result of all this is burn-out or hopelessness; or worse yet, success!

So what is the church to do about stoking the fires of hope in a world that seems to be moving away from the biblical standard? I'm glad you asked!

**We navigate life by trusting in the immutable promise of God and anchoring our lives to the hope of glory.** Life without hope isn't much of a life. The church provides hope for life in any context. Paul himself said he had learned to be content in any condition. So whether we find ourselves in wealth or poverty, hunger or plenty, sadness or joy, there is a hope that serves as an anchor for our souls and gives us cause to forge ahead in obedience to Christ. Hebrews 6 gives us some insight into this hope within the context of the church.

- A. Don't be apostate (Hebrews 5:11-6:8)** - We must continue to cling to the truth of God if we are to remain faithful. This text teaches us to move on from elementary doctrines and grow up into maturity. The consequence of staying immature is that we may not make it to the end. Instead, we may find that we *fall away* from what we had formerly professed. This is apostasy, and it has become something to celebrate in our culture. Renouncing Christianity will be met with cheers from the world. The text tells us that land bearing thorns and thistles is worthless and will be burned. Our warning from this is to see fruit in our lives by progressing in Christian doctrine, becoming mature instead of walking away.

- B. Imitate the faithful (Hebrews 6:12)** - One of the safeguards God has given believers is the church! Want to persevere in faith? Imitate the faithful. If we are to have *full assurance* (v. 11) then we must be fruit-bearing Christians. Faithful believers who have gone before us and set the example for us then become a kind of lamplight to us; showing us how to walk in obedience.
- C. God will gather his people (Hebrews 6:14-15)** - God's covenant to Abraham promised that there would be a great people come from him. This was promised way back in Genesis 22, but it is the beginning of the church. God's purpose for humanity from the very beginning was to make a people with whom he would dwell. He desired to have a people redeemed through his Son who would love and worship him forever. This is the church! What began in the old covenant will be completed in the new covenant.
- D. God's promise is sworn by himself (Hebrews 6:17)** - In order that we might be able to really trust God to keep his word, he made a promise and sealed it by swearing by himself. If we swear an oath, it must be by something greater than us. In court, we lay a hand on the Bible. On the playground, you swear on your mother's grave. God has nothing greater by which to swear, so he seals his oath by swearing by himself. The text says *it is impossible for God to lie* (v. 18), so he gives us the one thing that will never change, his word. Immutable means unchanging. We trust in God's immutable promise to bring his people together in his presence.
- E. So we hope in Christ's intercession (Hebrews 6:19)** - Our hope enters into the holy place of God, into his very presence. Who can bring us there? Only Jesus Christ, who acted on our behalf as our high priest. He became a man and went before us in order to make a way for us to enter into God's holy presence. This is where we drop our anchor. This is the hope that will bring us all together.

You see, if we want to march boldly into the future as the church, the only way to do it is by anchoring ourselves to something ancient. We become what we need to be to the world today by becoming like the Ancient of Days. We serve the culture not by conforming to it but by being transformed in the one who created it.

Let's begin laying the foundation for such a hope by sketching out a theology that makes God huge in our lives.

### III. A God-smitten Theology

If the church is going to be faithful to all God has called us to be, we must center our delight on all he is. We must become smitten with God, earnestly desiring him in everything. This will not only produce God's purpose in us, but it will make us happy as we do it. We can begin to see this theological foundation taking shape in these three elements: God's promise, power, and presence.

#### A. His Promise

God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 22) to make a people for himself led to a promise to Moses (Exodus 20). This promise gave structure to God's people and allowing them to see for themselves the holiness of God's perfect standard through the law. Since the law only exists to show us how unworthy and unholy we are before God, he made another promise (Jeremiah 31:31). This *new* covenant fulfilled the law and made a way for God's people to not only be merely reconciled with him, but also be holy just as he is. The promise made to us today is that we may be with him if we come through faith in Jesus Christ. This faith will transform us into a holy people who are one in Jesus.

Romans 5:1-2 explains that when we are justified by faith and as a result have peace with God, we have access to his grace. Did you catch that? We do! It isn't just about individual,



autonomous, personal salvation, but is about the salvation of God's collective people, his church!

### **B. His Power**

Paul let the church know in clear language that there was one thing he would never back away from or be ashamed about - the gospel (Romans 1:16). This good news of reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ in his perfect life, death, burial, and resurrection was for Paul his greatest possession. It is so for us as well because it is the power of God unto salvation. That is truly the best news we could possibly hear, but it gets even sweeter. The gospel saves all of us, the Jew first and the Greek. By the power of God, we come together from every background, nation, tribe, tongue, color, and class into one, unified, new people. God's power saves us *and* unites us. Therefore, any ministry of the church that ignores the gospel is not and cannot be Christian.

### **C. His Presence**

So God made a promise to create for himself a people and he provided the power by which we could come to him. But he doesn't stop there. He will consummate his promise by bringing us all the way home! The kingdom he is establishing is described by theologians as an "already/not yet kingdom". He has already begun to rule over his people and is preparing us for himself. But he has not yet closed the door on time and finally brought in all that are his. So we have the privilege of knowing him and experiencing his presence today even as we wait for the fullness of his presence in the future.

His presence today is of course known through his Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised to send to us when he returned to glory (John 16:16-17). We've conditioned ourselves to speak of the indwelling Spirit as something personal. While the Spirit does dwell with each of us individually and personally, Jesus uses the plural form of you (translated - y'all) when he says, "You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you (John 16:17)." We (the church) know the Spirit because he is dwelling with us and is in us. Let's get used to speaking of the indwelling Spirit as one who dwells not so much in "me" as he does in "us". He is with us right now.

In the *already* part of the kingdom, the Spirit has *already* come, but we haven't even scratched the surface of God's presence in our lives just yet. In Revelation 21:3 we are told, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." For anyone smitten with God, this is the greatest declaration possible. *God himself will be with them as their God*. His presence will be forever with us bodily as we are brought into his heaven.

The church will experience God's promise by God's power forever in God's presence. All of human history will culminate in this one glorious truth - God will dwell with his gathered people!

### **Conclusion**

We need a freshly ancient vision of the church. Namely, the biblical vision of the church as set down for us in the pages of the Old and New Testaments. Only with this vision can we begin to sift out useless practices that obscure the gospel and bring us into the clarity of God's glory for both his people and the world he has called his people to reach. Untying the knot of cultural standards with which we've entangled the biblical church can only be accomplished by going back to the source and foundation of the truths on which the church is established.



# Session One

## Discussion Guide

**USE AS MUCH OR AS LITTLE OF THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE AS YOU LIKE.**

### **Introduction**

How do we see contemporary worldview influencing the church?

What factors do you think are influencing the rise of the nones (30% rise in people professing no religious affiliation)?

Do you think dividing congregations to accommodate musical preferences is a good idea? Why or why not?

### **I. The Standard Practice**

Why is it important for theology to be foundation of our practice? How is the church's methodology (how we execute ministry) affected if we are not careful with theology?

Where do we see cultural standards practiced in the church today? Just because it is cultural, does that mean it cannot be useful to the church? Should we *always* avoid cultural elements in ministry and worship?

What do you think are some of the signs that we are holding cultural standards to be authoritative for the church? (The answer according to a comment I made in the lesson is that we evidence this when we get upset when a cultural element is removed from worship or ministry. For example: the minister of music decides to stop using choir robes; the pastor discontinues the Christmas Eve service the church has held for 20 years; a new Sunday School teacher decides to change the curriculum the class has used for 20 years; so on and so forth, you can probably think of a bunch more examples)

What are some examples of biblical standards for the church? (make sure that the answer to this question isn't just more examples of cultural standards. In order for it to be a biblical standard, the Bible must explicitly tell us to practice such things. See examples from the lesson. This is also why it is acceptable to have cultural expressions in our worship, because the Bible does not give specifics in some cases.)

### **II. Dropping the Anchor**

Adam mentions in the lesson that it is "en vogue" to commit apostasy today. Why do you think it has become easier for people to openly deny the faith they once professed?

What does Hebrews 6 tell us about staying faithful and continuing in faith?

Why is it important that God swears to himself when making a promise?

How is your hope in today's world? Does Hebrews 6:19 change the way you think about current events?

### **III. A God-Smitten Theology**

How does a person show they have a God-smitten life?

What do we mean by God-centered theology or Christ-centered ministry? Why must the gospel be present for ministry to be "Christian"?