

Essential Christianity

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Bethel Church is ramping up for the fall and we are excited about a new school year, new faces and people, and lots of new ministry opportunities. This time of year, we hold our annual Connection Fair and Ministry Fair. During the next few weeks, you will see lots of tables with people in the Commons to explain what the ministry involves and how you can connect with them. I want to talk with you about why this is essential to you and to us as a whole church family.

Have you ever heard of a bucket list? A bucket list is a list of those things you want to do before you kick the bucket. You might want to think about what is on your bucket list. I have always wanted to go whitewater rafting. How many of you have ever done it? Floating down Calumet River doesn't count. On my way to Georgia in July, I stopped in Duckland, Tennessee and rafted down the Ocoee River.



Because all of us rafting were total amateurs about to go down the raging river, the rafting company guides spent some time going over the essentials. The things you need to know to still be alive at the end of the day. We were assigned a guide. Our guide was a woman who could have easily taken any or all of the men in the boat. She had arms the size of my legs.

She said, there are four basic essentials on the raft and we had to work as a team. The first was forward rowing. She would yell, *Forward 1*, and that meant, we all rowed forward one stroke. Guess what *Forward 2* meant. *Backward 1, backward 2*. Yet get it. Then she explained leaning. There would be times in the rapids where we would have to all lean to keep the boat from flipping. So we practiced that. Then there was what we did in the dangerous places. She would yell "down" and we had to get off the sides and crouch or sit down in the bottom of the boat to keep from being thrown out. So after the explanation, on the shore, we practiced the essentials. *Forward 1! Forward 2! Lean right! Lean left! Down!* There are essentials needed for whitewater rafting.

Christianity is like that. Following Jesus has essentials. A local church is like a raft of Christians. We are preparing to head into the rapids of this year of ministry. Our survival and success will depend on how well we each perform the essentials and work together in the raft called Bethel Church.

To simplify this, a few years ago, our leaders spent time discussing how we could present the essentials of following Jesus in a way that would be biblically and theologically accurate

but also easily remembered. When you are in the rapids of life, you don't have time to analyze. *Move your oars in rapid procession from the starboard to the leeward side of the boat!* "Huh?" It needs to be easy, *Forward 1!* Got it.

Here are three biblical but simple essentials that all Christians, no matter what their age or maturity level, have to prioritize. They all start with E. Exalt. Experience. Engage.

Exalt – A life of worship

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)

It is necessary that any description of Christian discipleship begin with worship. That is what we mean by Exalt. To exalt something is to lift it up and to hold it high. By holding it high, we are making a value statement of what is most important to us. This is what I live for.

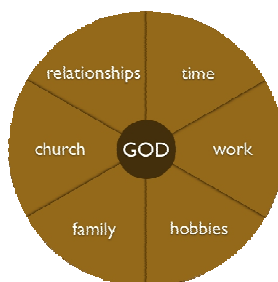
What are you living for? Everyone lives for something. Everyone worships something.

So how do you know where and what you worship? It's easy. You simply follow the trail of your time, your affection, your energy, your money, and your allegiance. At the end of that trail you'll find a throne; and whatever, or whomever, is on that throne is what's of highest value to you. On that throne is what you worship. - Louie Giglio, *The Air I Breathe* (Sisters: Multnomah, 2003)

A Christian is someone who has surrendered the throne of their heart to Jesus. Now the trail of our time, affection, energy, money, and allegiance should lead to Christ and His priorities for us. This is what Paul calls offering my life as a "living sacrifice." The sacrifice is living. It's something I do with my life. It is sacrificial, meaning it costs me something. It is all-encompassing. The Old Testament sacrificial animals gave everything.

The good news is that God's command is also what we spiritually crave. As Augustine said, *Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.* God made us for Himself and the worship impulse we all have is longing to get there.

Here is why "Exalt" is so critical to true Christianity. Worship is the uniting center for all of life.



There is no other priority that can claim this. Experience is great and important but not the center. Serving Christ is a high priority, but it's not the center. Exalt is the uniting principle of all of life.

That's not radical Christianity, its *real* Christianity. **Exalting His value and worth by glorifying Him in the way that I live every aspect of my life is what it means to be a disciple of Christ.** This is what Romans 12:1 calls *presenting our bodies as living sacrifices*. It's what the Greatest Commandment calls loving God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength. It's what 1 Corinthians 10:31, *doing all to the glory of God*.

What Does Exalt Look Like?

The Ocoee River gets a lot of traffic. There were many, like me, who were essentially whitewater rafting tourists, looking for a little thrill and then we get back in our cars and head for home.

It was obvious on the Ocoee River that there was a different kind of person on the river. First of all, they were in a different kind of boat; a kayak. They also had a different mindset. They are passionate about the river. They were easy to find because they congregated around the rocks and the rapids, not in the calm areas of the river. They want to be where the action is. They are buff. Tan. Serious about it. They love being there.

It seems to me that churches have the same two kinds of people: touristy types who are looking for a little weekend thrill so they can get back in their cars and return to their lives and the things they really care about. Then there are the kayaker types who love the river of ministry. They congregate around the tough spots. The ministry rocks and rapids are where they want to be. They love it.

One of our church's missions is to move people from the raft to the kayak. From the safe touristy experience to a passion for God and people that draws them to the rocks and the rapids. We will get to that; but it begins with worship. Exalt. Giving all that I am to God. Passion. Love. Worship.

There is much to say, but let me just highlight two essentials of an Exalting Christian:

Prioritize worshipping with God's people (Hebrews 10:24-25; Psalm 100, 122:1)

You can know what you worship by what you are happy to do. A quality disciple of Jesus prioritizes corporate worship and is glad to do so.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he, who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever and his faithfulness to all generations. (Psalm 100)

You hear the passion? This psalm expresses the heart of a God worshipper. Joy. Gladness. "Going to the temple for praise." Wouldn't miss it! The New Testament context for worship is the human heart and the gathering of God's people called the Church. Essential Christianity prioritizes these gatherings. There is nothing more helpful to your spiritual walk.

I have never known a quality disciple of Jesus who was anything less than regular and faithful in worship with their local church. Attending a worship service is no measure of spirituality, but a desire to do so is. Can I challenge all of us not to be church tourists? Exalt means passion and passion for God will get us to church.

Generous support of God's work – (2 Corinthians 8:1-15)

I am not going to explain this one as we have taught on tithing and giving in the past and how giving to God financially is worship. This is a chance to give kudos to the congregation.

We began 2009 like many ministries, uncertain about the economy and how things were going to go. We budgeted our smallest increase in years. What has happened is that in a majorly down year economically, we are having our best financial year ever. Here are some numbers:

Year to Date General Fund Giving
2008 \$1,616,136 2009 \$1,784,111 Increase of 10.4%

Our giving is up over 10% compared to last year. Wow! Few would have expected that. We are right on budget for the year and with a strong finish to the year could end up ahead of budget. If giving is an act of faith that says we trust God more than our money, then giving in a down economy is a great act of faith.

This means that many of you have exalted in God to a degree where the giving of your monies to Him was more important than the joy you would have in keeping it or spending it. That's a sign of exalting. *All I am for you, O God.* Well done!

Experience – Christianity in Community

Acts 2 records a dramatic transformation of humanity. Sociologists would struggle to explain it. There is no natural explanation. People from a huge geographical area gathered in Jerusalem. These are people who did not know each other, spoke different languages, and had cultural differences. They hear Peter preach the gospel. 3,000 believe. Immediately they begin to do what they had not done before. Look:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:42-45)

What had happened? This shared experience and belief in Christ drew them to one another. Not just corporately but also in smaller contexts. Homes. Meals. This horizontal expression of Christianity included personal sacrifice to meet the needs of others. What happened? *The love of God discovered and received through the gospel created a love for other Christians and a desire to be with them.* This is known as fellowship.

"Fellowship is more than coffee and donuts, more than getting together with people just like us. It's the unique blending together of people who have one thing in common, that is, that Jesus Christ has saved them and is developing them into people who reflect His image." (D. Swartz)

This is all over in the New Testament. CJ Mahaney, in his book, *Why Small Groups?*, gives a list of 30 horizontal commands. Let's read them out loud alternating back and forth.

1. *Be at peace with each other* (Mark 9:50)
2. *Love one another* (John 13:34)
3. *Be joined to one another* (Romans 12:5)
4. *Be devoted to one another* (Romans 12:10)
5. *Honor one another* (Romans 12:10)
6. *Rejoice with one another* (Romans 12:15)
7. *Weep with one another* (Romans 12:15)
8. *Live in harmony with one another* (Romans 12:16)
9. *Accept one another* (Romans 15:7)
10. *Counsel one another* (Romans 15:14)
11. *Greet one another* (Romans 16:16)
12. *Agree with each other* (1 Corinthians 1:10)
13. *Wait for one another* (1 Corinthians 11:33)
14. *Care for one another* (1 Corinthians 12:25)
15. *Serve one another* (Galatians 5:13)
16. *Carry one another's burdens* (Galatians 6:2)
17. *Be kind to one another* (Ephesians 4:32)
18. *Forgive one another* (Ephesians 4:32)
19. *Submit to one another* (Ephesians 5:21)
20. *Bear with one another* (Colossians 3:13)
21. *Teach, admonish each other* (Colossians 3:16)
22. *Encourage one another* (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
23. *Build up one another* (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
24. *Spur one another on* (Hebrews 10:24)
25. *Offer hospitality to one another* (1 Peter 4:9)
26. *Minister gifts to one another* (1 Peter 4:10)
27. *Be humble toward one another* (1 Peter 5:5)
28. *Confess your sins to one another* (James 5:16)
29. *Pray for one another* (James 5:16)
30. *Fellowship with one another* (1 John 1:7)

The New Testament calls us to a tremendous experience of horizontal Christianity. How does this happen? Magically? It just happens? The only way this happens is with intentionality on our part. Nobody does it for us. We have to do it. Bethel provides a great context where this aspect of Christianity is pursued through our Small Group ministries. We have over 60 small groups across Northwest Indiana. They resemble a kind of rafting experience. There were seven people in my raft. I didn't know everyone on the river but I got to know the ones in my raft. We worked together. Rowed together. Had fun together.

A small group is like a raft. It's a more intimate context for personal relationships, mutual ministry, and horizontal Christianity. They get together three times a month for Bible study, prayer, and fellowship. Next week's Connection Fair is primarily small groups. This is a great time, at the beginning of the ministry year, to get into a group.

Some of you might not be listening and here's what will happen. At some point this year you are going to think, "I wish I had some people in my life" or "I need some people to pray for me" or "I don't feel like I am really helping anyone." If you are a Christian not actively in fellowship and not having these feelings, there is probably something seriously wrong. There is a way for you to get that fellowship, but it requires a small step on your part.

Not joining a small group is like if I said to the guide with the big arms, I really want to experience the river! *Get into the raft.* It would be so great to have a rafting experience with other people. *Get into the raft!* I wish I had the feeling of pulling together with other people. *Get into the raft!* Get into a small group and experience fellowship on the river. It is an essential part of true Christianity.

Engage – a life of service for Christ

I am going to spend a tad less time on this one as we will hit it pretty hard soon in 1 Corinthians. Engaging in ministry for Christ is an essential part of essential Christianity. Serving Christ is how we exercise the muscle of our faith. This is what keeps us from gazing at our own navels and becoming an inwardly focused church. All about us. All about our comfort. Our needs. God has called us to a dying world and has given us the only message that saves. What else could be better than giving our effort to the fulfilling of the Great Commission that Jesus gave to us? So what is the game plan? What is the strategy?

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ... (Ephesians 4:11-12) The "he" in verse 11 is Christ Himself who equips church leaders to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry. Christ's vision was never for a few to do the work. Those few are like the guides in the raft. She was there shouting encouragement and steering the raft while we were rowing, leaning, and sitting. Imagine how the raft would go if we sat there while she tried to do the rowing. We wouldn't go anywhere.

A local church, by Christ's design, has guides and leaders who encourage and steer generally (*Forward 1, Backward 2, Lean!*). Christians in the church work hard in their areas of gifting doing the work of the ministry. As each does their role, the result is "the building up of the body of Christ." We want to be a building up of Christ kind of church, don't we? It's just like rafting. If only people on one side of the boat are rowing while the others are lazy, the raft goes in circles. If even one person doesn't do their part, the raft is not what it could be or should be. It requires everyone.

This is simple. This is basic. But this is essential. The church needs everyone in the raft, rowing. *Forward 1! Forward 2!* A guide can shout and encourage but unless the rafters are rowing, the raft is in trouble. So one thing we do to promote essential Christianity here at Bethel Church is to regularly give rafters the chance to get in the raft, to train them, and to get you on the river. For the next two weeks, it won't be any easier. There are people in the Commons you can talk to about ministry opportunities and how you can find out the best place for you to row.

Essential Christianity. Simple. Easy to remember. Exalt (worship). Experience (fellowship and horizontal Christianity). Engage (Serve). Take a moment and give yourself a grade on each of those. Exalting? Experiencing? Engaging? We're not here to beat you up about it; we are here to encourage you. *Forward 1!* God wants you in the boat and on the river enjoying the adventure He has for us.

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