

Church of the Scumbags 10/3/2010

Greg Boyd

One of the fringe benefits, one of the many benefits you have as a senior pastor and the public spokesperson for Woodland Hills Church, is you get to brag about your grandkids in public! And what grandpa doesn't like to do this? This is my new granddaughter [photo displays of Greg's daughter, son-in-law, and two granddaughters], Eden Cherish Gilbert. OK, so from left to right, that's Sage, my first granddaughter, that's my daughter Alicia, my son-in-law Tim, and that is Eden Cherish Gilbert. Isn't she beautiful? They're all out in North Carolina right now adopting this lovely child. And I just...thank God [using baby talk] this cute—all right, so there you go, there you go. I'm very proud of them.

This sermon this morning is entitled—I didn't give it this title, the creative team did—"The Church of Scumbags". You know we say that the church eventually takes on the countenance of the senior pastor so I guess this is kind of true here. [Laughter] "Church of the Scumbags", and it's a message which, if you internalize it, it could potentially reframe what you understand the church to be, what you understand to be a Christian. For some folks, especially who are new to Woodland Hills Church, this could rattle your cage just a little bit. I want to encourage you to hang in there throughout the whole message, all right?

"The Church of Scumbags." I'm going to start in a way that, I think I've only done this once before in the 20 years, or 18 years, that we've been in existence. And that is I want to start with a joke and the reason I don't do that much is because I'm terrible at telling jokes. I screw up the punch line; I am just the worst joke teller in the world. But this one I think I can handle. It's right in front of me here. It's one that I think a lot of you have heard before, or some version of it; there are a million versions of it. This is my version. And it's not just sort of a nice little fun ice-breaker, it really is making a theological point that I'm going to be coming back to time and again. So listen to this.

I was walking across a bridge one day and I saw a man standing on the edge about to jump. I ran over and said, "STOP! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked.

"Well, there's so much to live for!"

"Like what?"

"Are you religious?"

He said, "Yeah."

I said, "Me too! Are you Christian, Hindu, Muslim or Buddhist?"

"I'm a Christian."

"Me too!! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"I'm a Protestant."

"ME TOO!! Are you Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, or Baptist?"

[Laughter]

"I'm a Baptist."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Southern Baptist, General Baptist, Northern Baptist, or Separatist Baptist?"

[Laughter]

"Separatist Baptist," he said.

"ME TOO! Are you the Original Separatist Baptist or the Reformed Separatist Baptist?"

[Laughter]

"Well, I happen to be Reformed Separatist Baptist."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Reformed Separatist Baptist reformation of 1879 or Reformed Separatist Baptist reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Well, I'm Reformed Separatist Baptist reformation of 1915."

I said, "Die, heretic scumbag!" And I pushed him off the bridge.

[Laughter]

[Greg imitates kicking someone]

Well, see, what's funny about that is it hits kind of close to home. I mean, that kind of thinking...that kind of thinking, unfortunately, is all too pervasive in the church throughout history and the church today. "You're either *on* our side or you're *not* on our side." There's a very clearly defined wall, a parameter, that either defines you as being an insider or a scumbag. We'll see here in the passage that we're looking at this morning that Jesus had a slightly different kind of attitude.

We're up to Luke 23; we're looking at the crucifixion narrative. Jesus is crucified and there's a criminal on His right and a criminal on His left. Starting in verse 39,

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.”

That was the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the outer court. And the Holy of Holies sort of represented God's presence and so by being torn in two it was signifying that now with the death of Jesus, the separation between God's presence and the rest of the world, has been torn down. God is doing a sort of “ololy in free” as we'll see here a little later on.

“Jesus then called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this, he breathed his last.”

Pray with me here just for a moment.

Father, for every person in this auditorium and every person who will be listening through podcast or some other means around the world, God, I just pray that you would open our hearts and open our minds to receive your word. And if there are any limitations that we put on your goodness on your love, any parameters we place around it, I pray Lord that you would use this message to blow them apart. And God, help us to reframe who you are and what you're up to in the community you've called us to be in so far as that's necessary. Come in your spirit, come in your power, and baptize us in your scandalous love. We pray in Jesus' name. And all God's people said [Audience joins] Amen.

I've shared a little bit about this in the past; I want to share it again. The first Christian community that I was a part of when I came to Christ at the age of 17 was in this really radical Pentecostal church. And the people there were just so...they were very sincere, very loving, passionate, loved God, you know just some wonderful, wonderful people there. And God really used that community to really change some profound things in my own life. But it was a church that was wound up rather tightly. Around theology, around ethics, it was...it had its way of doing things. It had *strong* parameters that it understood to define the “insiders” versus the “outsiders.” In this community, for example, if you weren't baptized exactly in the right way,

and we were about the only ones who did it that way, then you weren't saved. You had to have the right words said over you, the right formula, the right mode or you weren't saved. You were lost, you were a heretic scumbag! You had to have the right view of God, the *exact* right view of God. And the right view of God, by the way, was *not* Trinitarian, this was a non-Trinitarian church. If you believed in the Trinity, you were lost! So almost all Christians throughout history were going to hell; we were the only ones who were saved. And then, you *had* to speak in tongues not just to be more spiritual, but to be saved. If you didn't speak in tongues you weren't considered saved. Strong parameters. You were either in or out, you talk in tongues or not, you believe in Oneness or you believe in Trinity, you're baptized this way or you're baptized that way. Any of those can mean that you're lost. But we're just getting warmed up because they had a ton of rules! Oh man, it was magnificent the list of things to do and not to do. And so, for example, in this particular church women couldn't cut their hair at all, ever. And they had to wear dresses. And guys, conversely, had to have short hair and could *never* wear dresses [Laughter]. Dave, I don't know if you heard that. You didn't get the memo on that one. But yeah, it was just a ton of rules: don't go to movies, couldn't go to bowling allies or any sporting event, you couldn't do anything but eat and we did a lot of that. Gluttony wasn't one of the sins in this church. But everything else was! So it was just wound up very tight!

I remember going in to the opening of a church, the vestibule, foyer of this one church that was part of this denomination. It was in Connecticut and in [he points to his right]...I'm pointing over here because these folks were in the same church...there was this huge poster. It was a cartoon drawing. It was just magnificent. You walk in and it was the first thing you see and it had a judgment scene. And there an angry God up on the judgment seat and there's all these people falling into hell, falling like over a cliff and there's fire there. And they're all falling into hell. And they had a close-up of one lady who's falling; she's just about ready to go into the flames like this [he looks down with his hands blocking his face]. She's terrified, and out of her mouth you read the words, "I guess I did need to speak in tongues" [Audience gasps]. This was like a *great* first impression, you know. You're visiting this church and it's just like, "Whoa!" And they're advertising some kind of Bible study or something, but see there are clear parameters. You're either in or out. If you're in you're saved, if you're out you're not.

Now that church and that denomination was obviously really extreme in having this "us" versus "them" parameter kind of thinking but that sort of thing is found all over the place. Where you're in or out based on whether you're Separatist Baptist reformation 1879 or Separatist Baptist reformation 1915; very clearly defined categories. I remember coming upon a tract that somebody left at Bethel College when I was teaching there. It was one of these "chick" tracts, as I recall which are sometimes just hilarious and sometimes kind of sad. But this one was pretty sad. The title this, some of you are going to love this, the title of this tract was,

“Are You a Christian, or Do You Smoke?” [Laughter] I’m serious! And OK, so you guys who like an occasional cigar you better enjoy that smoke now because later on you’re going to be smoking all eternity! You will *be* the smoke! It’s just incredible.

And the criteria depend on the communities. I mean, in some circles you can be declared a heretic scumbag because you don’t believe in a young earth, or you don’t have the right view of the rapture, or you don’t have the right particular view of the end times, or you don’t support Israel the way they do, or you don’t use the King James Version; I mean real clear categories that define you “in” or “out”. I’ve been put on the outside, declared a heretic scumbag by a number of groups for various reasons. I hold that the future partly consists of possibilities. That makes you a heretic scumbag. Or some don’t think I’m pro-American enough, or I don’t crack down on evolution, or one group thought I had the wrong view of Christology. And one guy on television, I think, called me a “liberal heretic” because I didn’t agree with his dating on the book of Daniel! You see, the criteria changes from community to community, but it’s the parameter; you’re either with us or you’re against us and here’s the criteria you have to hold and embrace that determines which side you are on. What’s really interesting is that, more often than not, these criteria are rather arbitrary especially when it comes to ethics and behaviors; very arbitrary.

So this first church that I was a part of, I don’t recall ever hearing a sermon on gluttony, or a sermon on greed, or a sermon on gossip, or a sermon even on violence. It was just sort of assumed that if the cause was justified you could kill! That seemed to be OK. But it was well known that you don’t go to movies, and you don’t dance, and you don’t play cards, and you don’t drink, and you don’t get involved in inter-racial marriages. That was frowned on. And the odd thing is that if you read the Bible at all you’ll find that it has a whole LOT to say about gossip, and a whole LOT to say about greed, and a whole LOT to say about gluttony. It actually condemns the kind of racist attitudes that would lead someone to think that inter-racial marriages are inappropriate. In fact, given that the kingdom is all about tearing down racial walls, and all about reversing Babel, I would argue that the New Testament actually *encourages* inter-racial marriages. But see, what the community believes has nothing really to do with the Bible. The community conditions you to read the Bible so you notice some things as being “minor” sins and notice other things as being “major” sins and your sins are the “minor” ones but the outsiders’ sins are the “major” ones, even though the “outsiders” sins are mentioned maybe three times in the Bible and yours are mentioned three hundred times. You see, it’s just an arbitrary sort of thing. But it’s all parameter thinking, “Are you in or are you out?”

Now, with that in mind, let’s go back to the thief on the cross. The thief says to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus says, “Today you’ll be with me in paradise.” Notice what Jesus did *not* ask. He didn’t ask *anything*. Can you imagine

Jesus...you know the guys says, "Remember me. Please can I go with you into the kingdom?" and Jesus up there on the cross (get a picture of this) turns and says, "Well, do you smoke? [Laughter] You don't play cards, do you? Um, how old do you think the earth is? It depends. I'd love to say 'Yes' but we gotta answer a couple of questions here. Do you speak in tongues? How exactly were you baptized? What's your view on the ontological status of future possibilities? And, after all, how do you date the book of Daniel?" You know, see, Jesus doesn't go there! He doesn't ask any of those kinds of questions. He sees the heart of this guy; he sees the heart and says, "You're in. You have a heart that is oriented towards me. You're in, you're in." [Applause] It's amazing. This guy could have had nothing going for him. I mean his theology couldn't have been very *accurate*! He couldn't have even had a very accurate view of who Jesus is. I mean, this is the first time he's meeting the guy and they're two breathes away from dying. He didn't have any good Christology, didn't have any theology and he obviously didn't live a very good life because now he's getting executed for his crimes. But what he had was some kind of awareness that if there's any hope for him at all it's found in this guy right next to him, and that was enough! "You're in." No other questions asked. It's this beautiful, magnificent, inclusive kind of love that Jesus demonstrates on the cross. In fact, it's the kind of love He demonstrated throughout all of His life. You know the Bible says that the prostitutes and tax collectors, the worst sinners in the 1st Century, they gravitated towards Him. They wanted to hang out with Him. And you never read any questions that Jesus ever asked them. He never interrogated them, He just went to parties with them, just seemed to love them as they were; which is probably why they wanted to hang out with Him! No one likes to go to a party where you're going to be interrogated and get background checks! Jesus never did this. When Jesus would go and find people who were demonized He never put them to a theological interrogation, "How did you get so demonized, Mary Magdalene?! What kind of life were you living, for crying out loud? Were you playing with Ouija boards, fornicating, or what was it here?!" You know there are groups that would do that, "We gotta check into the background to find out what sin allowed the demon to get here." Jesus just sees the person in their oppressed state and out of His love and power He frees the person from that oppressed state. No questions asked! Same thing with His healing ministry, you know, he comes upon the blind, the deformed and others and the rest of the folks of the culture are judging them for being cursed of God, they must have had some sin in their life, but Jesus *never goes there*. In fact, He rebukes the kind of thinking that goes there. He just sees a need and He meets it.

In some ways you can think of Jesus' entire life as sort of being a "modeling" of the torn curtain. In the Old Testament when a person was going to go into the Holy of Holies, go behind the curtain into the presence of God, *one* person was allowed to do it *once* a year and they had to meet a *hundred* pre-requirements. They had to wear just the right clothes, had to have the right office (had to be the high priest), had to make the right sacrifices, had to wash themselves in waters in a particular way and they would go into that place with fear and trembling. But

when Jesus' death occurred, the curtain is torn in two, and it's as though God is saying, "OK, the wall of separation between my innermost heart, my presence, and all people has been torn in two." God is shouting out this "olly olly oxen free", "Anybody who wants can now come in!" The wall has been torn down, the wall has been destroyed, and that's what Jesus is modeling in His life, in His ministry, in His teachings, and in His death. It's like God has this tremendous bear hug around all of humanity and He's saying, "You are all on the 'inside', you're all on the inside of my love. Whoever has any sort of movement towards me is considered an 'insider'." And so you find passages throughout the New Testament that say things like this (for a lot of people it doesn't fit their theology, but we gotta listen to these):

"For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." I Corinthians 15:2

"As all were in Adam so now all are in Christ!" A number of passages say that. It's like, "All of you were outsiders but now I consider all of you insiders." This is a new human race that is being created here founded on Jesus Christ. And from that perspective God regards all as being insiders, has this bear hug around everybody. Now you can still put yourself out, you can still say "No" to this. You can resist God's love. God's not going to make you into a robot! You can bring destruction on yourself, to the grief of God's heart. But from God's perspective there's this "olly olly in free", there's this bear hug around humanity. It's an all-inclusive love. The cross reveals Jesus' prayer for forgiveness, reveals Jesus' dialogue with the thief, reveals everything about Jesus, reveals the true heart of God, and it is breathtakingly magnificent. He reveals a God whose love can't be...goes beyond any words we might have. It goes beyond any ability to comprehend that we might have. It's inconceivable, it's unfathomable, it's as wide as the east is from the west, it's un-improvable, it's absolutely perfect, it's unwavering, it's a love that knows no conditions. It has no boundaries, it has no parameters. It includes everybody. It's beautiful. God does not make it hard to get into the kingdom! He's a God of *lavish* love, *lavish* forgiveness, *lavish* acceptance and that's what Jesus modeled. That's what the curtain being torn models. He doesn't make it hard. In fact, you gotta opt out of it!

So the question, the million dollar question is this, if God makes it so easy to get in the kingdom, why do churches make it so hard?! [Applause] Think about it! If God's love is so *inclusive*, why are so many churches *exclusive*? If Jesus could say this to the thief on the cross, getting into the kingdom, then why is it in some religious communities you've got 47 different hoops you gotta jump through before you're considered one of the insiders. If the church is called to manifest the character of Jesus Christ and introduce people to Jesus Christ, then why doesn't the church look like Jesus Christ?! Act like it! Where's the "olly olly in free" in the church? Where's the attitude toward the thief on the cross in the church? Unfortunately, it's very, very rare. Why is that? One of, I think, the crucial answers to that question has gotta be this: a community that would be based on the all-inclusive love that Jesus demonstrates on the

cross and throughout His life, a community that would be based on that kind of love (which is what the church is called to be) that community will look very, very different from “normal” communities. Throughout history most, if not all, communities, whether you’re talking states or nation or tribe or ethnic groups or families, have had strong parameters (the outer rim of a circle) defining who’s in and who’s out. Most, if not all, human communities throughout history have had an “us” versus “them” component to them. But a community that’s defined by the all-inclusive love of God is going to look very, very different from that. There are some sociologists who argue that can’t possibly *have* a community, a human community, that doesn’t have strong parameters. In fact, many argue that the strength, the bond of a community will be directly related to how strong their parameter is. And the more you have an identifiable enemy the stronger you’re going to be. That’s what some sociologists argue and they *currently* have a point. There’s some truth to that; a lot of truth to that. Political leaders throughout history have always known that the best way to rally your people together, especially if you’re in some kind of trouble and you want to get a distraction going, the best way to rally your people together is to install a fear of an “other” in them. And to install hatred towards the other, have an identifiable enemy. That’s why countries, when they’re at war, usually they’re strongest. There’s a unity there. You’re rallying against a common enemy. A strong parameter on who’s in and who’s out and they are out and we need to be afraid of them.

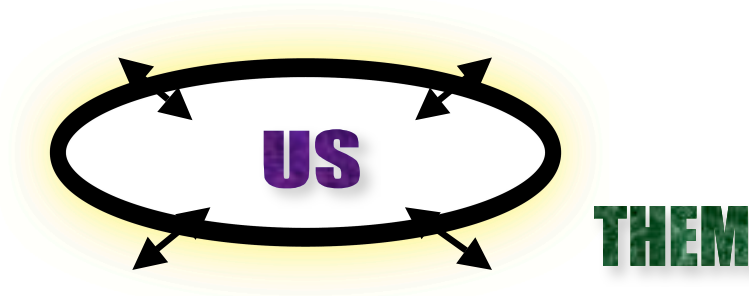
You see this throughout history, you see it yet today. You know we’re in election season so you see it probably more than you otherwise would. Listen to the commercials carefully sometimes. They don’t usually say, “Hey, uh, here’s my policy, here’s my opponents policy and you decide which one’s best but I think mine’s better.” That’s not how they do commercials. No, they want to play off the “us/them” thing, “I’m one of you but they’re not.” So you have this ominous music, you know it’s, “dun da dun da dun da dun da” [imitating music] you know, and “So and so’, they say they’re one of us but they’re not one of us. They says they’re on our...we know who’s side they’re on. ‘So and so’, you know they say they’re on your side but they just like to hang out with the rich. They’re not one of us, no. ‘So and so’, they say they’re on your side but they want to take away your jobs, they want to ruin the economy, that’s what they want to do. They want to destroy the country. They’re probably not even American. ‘So and so’ says they’re one of us but we know that he’s the *Antichrist*! He wants to eat your babies!” I mean it just goes on and on and on. “Be afraid! I’ll save you, but be afraid of that outsider!” Us versus them stuff. But all communities throughout history have had some dimension of that.

And then, when religion gets brought in the picture, typically those communities have the same kind of parameters but they have it on *steroids*! Because what happens is you bring God into the picture and heaven into the picture and hell into the picture and so you’ve just upped the ante considerably. Now it’s just not a matter of belonging to a community and

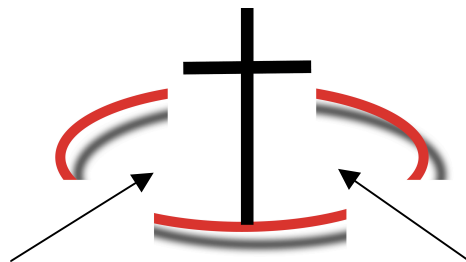
having earthly security but issues of heaven and hell, salvation and damnation are at stake and so religious communities tend to live in a sort of mindset where you're asking the question, "Are you of God or are you of Satan? Are you on our side or Satan's side? Are you orthodox, like we are, or are you a heretical scumbag? Are you righteous, like we are, or are you a damnable, sinful scumbag? Are you Separatist Baptist reformation of 1879 or Separatist Baptist reformation 1915?!" And if you're wrong about that, or you don't speak in tongues, you got the wrong view of God, you got the wrong view of baptism, or you cut your hair [Laughter] or you smoke, well then forget about it, forget about it. You're one of the outsiders. Religion has this with a vengeance. The parameters tend to be more well-defined and more detailed because the stakes are so high.

And that's why you find, even in the Christian church throughout history after about the 5th Century A.D. you find Christians, in the name of the one who told us to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies, persecuting other people even other Christians and sometimes for minutia! Stuff we would look at and go, "What?! What up with that? How could you burn someone for *that*?" So, for example, John Calvin who burned Michael Servetus (a guy named Michael Servetus) *alive*! And it took six hours because it was a windy day and they were using green wood. And the reason John Calvin was burning this guy alive was because Michael Servetus wouldn't use the word "eternal" before Son. He said Jesus is the "begotten" Son so He's not the "eternal" Son. That made John Calvin very angry because that was one of the parameter things. You gotta say the word "eternal". So they set him on fire on this windy day using green wood and they kept saying to him, "If you'll only say the word 'eternal' we'll let you out of here! You can be free. But you gotta say the word 'eternal'!" And he's going, "Mmm-mmm" [shaking his head to negate]. I don't know if he had so much integrity or he was just stupid, but he never did say the word "eternal" and he finally died. But see the reasoning is this, "We're part of the righteous saved club and we use the word 'eternal'. He doesn't use the word 'eternal' so he's not one of us. We have to shore up the parameters; we have to tell people how important it is to say the word 'eternal' before Son so we gotta make an example out of him" so you put him to death. And so it would go throughout church history. Religious communities tend to be parameter communities on steroids. So the sociologists are making a point. They've got a truth there, but here's the thing. A community that is centered on, rooted in, grounded in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ can't look anything like that. A community that's going to be rooted in this all-inclusive love of God will be a community that's defined by the *center* not the *parameter*. In fact, it really won't have an identifiable parameter; it will just have a center.

So I want to now talk about the difference between a "centered community" and what I'll call a "parameter community". You can visualize it like this. This is sort of what most communities look like: [below find a replica of that found on the power point presentation]



There's a *strong, defining* parameter and the parameter defines who's in and who's out and there's always this polarization there. And sociologists, many of them say, the stronger the parameter and the stronger the polarization, the stronger the community. It's an "us/them" sort of community. Very typical of the world; it reflects our fallen nature. Here is what a centered community would look like: [below find a replica of that found on the power point presentation]



Now there may be non-Christian centered communities but I can't think of any. But certainly the kingdom is supposed to be a centered community where there's not a clear parameter. The parameter is "porous" as it were because no one's trying to define that exclusively. No one's getting life by trying to define who's in and who's out. It's porous, it's murky, and it's ambiguous. What defines the community is not the parameter but the center. We're moving towards a center; the thrust is always toward the center being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. So let's break it down a little further. It looks like this. I have a little chart here:

Parameter Community _____ Centered Community

Defined by Parameter

Defined by Center

Us vs. them

Us for Him

Parameter communities, as I just said, are defined by the parameter and it will vary from community to community. Whereas a centered community is defined completely by the center which means that in a parameter community you're characterized as an "Us vs. Them" sort of thing. But in a centered community, in the kingdom community, you're defined as an "*Us for Him*", not "Us vs. Them" but "Us for Him". In fact Paul tells us in Ephesians 6 that our struggle is *never* against flesh and blood. If it's a human being it's someone that you're "for", you're not allowed to be against them. You're not allowed to consider them an outsider or an enemy. We do have a foe, we do have an enemy, but it's not flesh and blood. It's the principalities and powers; it's Satan. It's the dominions and evil forces that are always trying to get us to compromise our kingdom walk. You can think of the center community as something like what happens when Jesus is on the hillside teaching and a bunch of folks show up. They're facing Jesus, they're all looking the same direction, they're not looking at each other trying to assess whether they belong there or not. "Are you one of us or not." No! Whoever shows up, even the thief on the cross, is there to hear Jesus, and is moving towards Jesus. That, by the criteria Jesus is giving in this passage--that is a kingdom community.

This is why in parameter communities you will always find judgment. Judging is part of what defines the community. You'll be conditioned to wear spectacles where you'll notice certain things. Now you'll not notice a bunch of other things, like your own sin, but you *will* notice those deal-breaker sins. And you'll feel righteous for noticing them. I've known Christians who feel guilty with certain kinds of sins if they don't point it out. They feel like they're condoning it and they feel guilty. When you live in a parameter community, you are a trained, conditioned, brain washed judger. That's part of the life. Whereas in a centered community you're free to just accept whoever shows up freely without questions because you're letting go of that judgment mechanism. Your eyes are always on the center, which is why we always teach here that if someone hasn't invited you in on your life to help you walk out the kingdom, and you help them walk through the kingdom—if that hasn't happened, your only obligation is to love them, agree with God that they're worth dying for and bless them. Not to have another thought about it. So you collapse the judgment stuff in a centered community. In a parameter community, what it means to be saved is that you have a club membership:

Parameter Community

Centered Community

Defined by Parameter

Defined by Center

Us vs. them

Us for Him

Saved = Club Membership

Saved = moving toward the center

You're one of the saved club, you're an insider not an outsider; whereas, in a centered community salvation would be a matter of moving towards the center, moving towards the center. In the parameter community it's an "all or nothing" kind of thing. You're either in or out. You either meet the criteria or you don't. But see, in the centered community salvation is about participating in the life of God, and so it's a process thing. That means the parameter will be ambiguous because no one's trying to be the security guard policing the parameter to see, "Are you really in or not?" No, it's about the movement, what direction are you going. And as a matter of fact, this is how the New Testament talks about salvation, people who are trained in parameter communities always think of salvation as a onetime thing, in or out. And they won't notice a lot of verses that disagree with that. But, for example, you'll find in the New Testament that salvation is talked about in three different tenses. You *were* saved, but also you *are being* saved and you *shall be* saved. It's a process, it's a directionality. We're moving in the same direction but it's not a matter of who's in or who's out or, "How far along are you?" or anything of the sort.

And in parameter communities they will tend to read the Bible as a manual, a manual of membership:

Parameter Community

Centered Community

Defined by Parameter

Defined by Center

Us vs. them

Us for Him

Saved = Club Membership

Saved = moving toward the center

Bible = Membership Manual

Bible = Travel Guide

You're trained to read all the passages, all the instruction, as sort of "criteria" for membership. And again, it's going to be arbitrary, it's going to be selective depending on how you were trained to read the Bible. You'll notice some sins and you won't notice others and the ones that

you won't notice are you own but the ones you will notice are the ones that are defined by the parameter. "People who have these sins, well, they're outsiders." But it's a manual of membership; whereas, in a centered community it's more like a travel guide. You find God's revelation here, you find the ideals held up but we're all aware that we're not *there* yet, we're all in process. And so it's about journeying in this direction and helping one another do it.

Finally, it parameter communities I would argue that they're always inherently idolatrous.

<u>Parameter Community</u>	<u>Centered Community</u>
Defined by Parameter	Defined by Center
Us vs. them	Us for Him
Saved = Club Membership	Saved = moving toward the center
Bible = Membership Manual	Bible = Travel Guide
Idolatrous	Life in Christ Alone

And what I mean by that is that people—part of what makes you OK, what makes you right, what makes you feel special is that you belong to this community. You're inside the parameters, you get life, to some degree---you get worth and security and significance and feel OK because you believe the *right* things as opposed to the heretic scumbags and you *do* the right things as opposed to the sinful scumbags. And that's an idol! Anything we get life from other than Jesus Christ is an idol. In a centered community the source of life, the only source of life, is Jesus Christ. You still want to believe the right things, yes, and you still want to live the right life, yes, but you don't get *life* from that which is why you don't have to contrast it with anybody. No, you just get your life and your worth and significance and your security from Jesus Christ. And this is why, some of you I'm sure have experienced this, but depending on the circle that you're in, in some parameter Christian communities, it's very hard to talk about certain topics calmly or to ask questions and dialogue them (I got an 'Amen' there) and do it in a calm way. You can talk about maybe the interpretation of Leviticus or Numbers of some obscure passage, that's kind of fun, have Bible studies there. But you call into question Genesis 1 or start questioning Romans 1, BOOM! You pressed a hot button, see? You're questioning the parameter and if the parameter is an idol for these people—well when you attack somebody's idol they get very, very irate. Their very identity is wrapped up in this. So, you just

know that there are some “no talk” rules. You’re not allowed to have any sort of disagreement on certain topics, on certain passages because those are parameter issues. To question it is—you’re considered an outsider. But see if we’re in a centered community and we’re striving to get all our life and worth and significance from Jesus Christ alone then we ought to be able to talk about *anything* and not get all weird about it. No, in fact Paul says, “Do it all in love, talk in love.” Whether it’s politics or whether it’s theology or whether it’s lifestyle you know—you can have passion and convictions about stuff but if it’s not your source of life, well then you can learn—but what if you disagree? Because if your life is from Christ, you’re not getting your life from your opinions about various things which is why we can learn from one another and be growing and have dialogue.

The kingdom is called to be a centered community. Woodland Hills, in so far as we want to be a kingdom community, we are called to be a centered community. But what it requires is rather challenging. Here’s the balance. On the one hand, to be a centered community means everything hangs on the center. You have to have strong center. This is what we’re defined by, not what we’re against but by what we’re *for*, who we’re for. The center of the center is Jesus Christ. He’s our only source of life and so everything we’re about is going to have something to do with Jesus Christ. If there’s stuff going on in society it may be good but if it’s not involving Jesus Christ we’re not interested in it because what we’re interested in as a community, ultimately the *only* thing we’re interested in, is growing in our conformity to Jesus Christ, having a life that’s submitted to Him. So Jesus is the center of the center. Now, right around Him we’ve got core Biblical truths that we believe in. We want to be preaching the whole counsel of the word of God as we understand it. Some folks will see it a little differently and we’re OK with this, but we rally around some core beliefs, beliefs that define who God is and who we are and what’s going on in the world and things like that. That’s part of the center of this community.

And then we’ve got our understanding of the life that we’re called to live and so we want to passionately and without compromise be holding up the center of Jesus Christ and core Biblical truth and preaching the word of God and preaching the kingdom lifestyle. We want to do it passionately and without any compromise whatsoever, calling people to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ; calling people to be growing and becoming Godly in the way that they think, and in their sex life, and in their wallets, and how they spend their money, and in their relationships, and on their job and calling people to resist the principalities and powers by not giving into the pull of the idols of our culture, the pull of consumerism and materialism and racism and hedonism and all of that, to stay away. To live a life that’s revolting against that. We want to be holding up the center that tells us to honor the first mandate that God gave us, to be people who take care of the earth and care for the animals and the environment and people who care for the poor. We want to be holding up the ideal of Jesus when He tells us to

love our enemies and to purge our life of all violence without compromise; passionately teaching, preaching, modeling this. That's one pole of the balance. On the other hand we have to, precisely because we're holding up Jesus at the center, confess that we are not there yet. We're all in process here. We could all be judged as being a bunch of scumbags. And this very center, the example He set and the teaching He gives, call us, as passionately as we hold up the center, to be an all inclusive community that welcomes all without any question; that embraces all, anybody who shows up and who has any interest in moving in this direction, you are an insider. And there's no scaling here, there's no rating system here, there's no "I'm higher than you" or anything like that. We do require people in leaderships that you have to lead with your life as well as your words. The New Testament calls them to a higher calling. But as the community there's got to be this all-inclusive bear hug where *any* person in *any* situation, whatever else has gone on, you are an insider; as much of an insider as anybody else is. That's the attitude of Jesus towards the thief on the cross. This is what the kingdom is all about [Audience applause]. Amen!

So you may be here and it may be that you are—you've been a criminal all your life and you're facing execution and one day you're going to die and you've screwed up everything and your theology is a complete mess. We want to say, "Welcome to the kingdom" because that's what Jesus did to the thief on the cross [Applause]. It doesn't matter. You may have been—you are a living train wreck! OK, fine. You've screwed up. You've hurt people. You've messed up your life, your marriage. You're on all sorts of drugs; you're in every kind of bondage that anyone's ever thought of, just a complete wreck. You are by everyone's standard a scumbag and we say, "Welcome to the Church of Scumbags." You're an insider. [Applause] Without any questions; without any questions.

I got to say one final thing and that is this. Some will hear this, I suspect (because this is where you're at and I bless you) but some will hear this and say, "Oh! OK! So the kingdom is about everyone just kind of does their own individual thing and no one has the right to tell me it's wrong." And I just want to say that is so, so, so NOT what I am saying. It's true that if you haven't invited me in your life and I haven't invited you on my life our only obligation is to bless one another and to agree with God that you are worth dying for. And I don't have to—in fact I'm forbidden to have any other kind of judgment about you. I don't care what I see in your life. I don't care—no, I just, I'm glad that you're here and let's focus on Jesus together. That's true. On the other hand what is also very, very true is we can't do this alone. If you're serious—this is a growing process—but if you're serious about growing in the kingdom, if you're serious about being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, you need to have other people in on your life. You need to be part of a community where you together are striving towards the center. I can't hope to really make any progress in the kingdom life; I can't hope to be increasingly conformed to Jesus Christ, learning how to love my enemies better than I do now. I can't hope

to be fighting the “isms” of the culture and the pull of the culture and the materialism of the culture if I don’t have some people who are in on my life who can know me enough and have permission to speak into my life; challenge me, help me stay awake and not get lulled to sleep by the monotony of the culture and the pull of the principalities and powers. We need one another. Everybody needs some people in on their life. That’s why the New Testament church was a small unit of folks getting together and loving one another and helping one another swim upstream. If you’re serious, you know the kingdom is from beginning to end all unfathomable grace but living it out is very austere, if you’re serious about it. It takes intentionality and discipline to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ and we can’t do that alone. We all need people in on our life. What nobody needs is a bunch of strangers who don’t know anything about their life sizing them up trying to decide whether they’re in or out. There’s no place for that in the kingdom.

And so the final question I end with is this, can we (this is your spiritual community) can we Woodland Hills Church commit to being a centered community and not a parameter community? Can we commit to striving passionately for the center; to holding up the center day in and day out without compromise and aspiring towards that? Jesus calls it “seeking first the kingdom of God”. Can we aspire to be a community like that, passionately? And then pray to get relationships, if you don’t have them already, relationships that help you do that! That’s the kingdom community. But at the same time can we commit to being a community that as we passionately pursue the center we collapse all parameter thinking; collapse all judgments, all evaluation. It’s really tough for folks who are coming out of parameter communities. If you come out of a church—you’ve been conditioned to do that. This is going to be a total reframe for you. But that’s the call of the kingdom, to let go. Confess that you are a scumbag so it doesn’t matter what scumbagness you see in another. No, that’s a minor “scumbagness” compared to the scumbagness that you have. Am I making up words on the fly here? No, no. You collapse the judgment. I pray that God will help us to be a centered community that has just got a bear hug around all people at all times. No questions asked. Welcome to the kingdom.

As I close in prayer I want to ask the prayer teams to come forward here and invite you if you have any need whatsoever that you’d like to have prayed for, come up and pray with these folks. And by the way, I want to tell you that they are sworn to confidentiality. I’ve understood that some folks have had nervousness because maybe you’ve had a past experience where things have gotten out. These folks are covenant with the team and with God to keep confidentiality. So it’s safe to share with them. I want to remind you that the sign up for the Undivided series is at The Hub. Also, I encourage you to do the homework that’s in your bulletin to help internalize this message throughout the week.

Father, by your grace help us, God, to be a people who don't police the parameter, who just get rid of that thinking; who just love people as they are, who welcome them into the kingdom at the slightest move towards you. Lord, God, help us to be a people who get all of our life and worth from you and therefore don't need to be feeding off of other people or contrasting with people. Help us to be a centered community that passionately seeks first the kingdom of God with intentionality and discipleship and just celebrates any person who's along for the ride as we do so. In Jesus name we pray. And all of God's kingdom people said? [Audience "Amen!"] Amen. God bless you guys. Love you. Go out and build the kingdom.