

10. The implications of loving the Church

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Date: 19 May 2013

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[0 : 00] We are going to turn now to our Bibles, and perhaps you would turn with me in the Bibles, to the New Testament and to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. If you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, then that should be found on page 967.

Page 967, but we're going to read together in 2 Corinthians chapter 7, beginning at verse 2, which you'll see begins a new section, following on immediately from what we studied last Sunday evening.

Paul is writing to this church in Corinth, a young church, a new church, which he founded when he first preached the gospel there, and which he had great love for, and continued to be in correspondence with, and longed to visit.

And you'll sense that as we read. 2 Corinthians chapter 7 at verse 2. Make room in your hearts for us, says Paul.

We've wronged no one. We've corrupted no one. We've taken advantage of no one. I don't say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts to die together and live together.

[1 : 19] I'm acting with great boldness towards you. I have great pride in you. I'm filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I'm overflowing with joy.

For even when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn, fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoice still more.

For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it, although I did regret it. For I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while.

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment.

[2 : 47] At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. So, although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God.

And therefore we're comforted. And besides our own comfort, we rejoice still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.

For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus proved true.

And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. I rejoice, because I have perfect confidence in you.

Amen. And may God bless this reading of his word to us and help us to understand it as we study it shortly with Edward. Well, friends, let's turn to our 2 Corinthians again, page 967.

[4 : 12] And we're picking up from where we left off, I think, a fortnight ago in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth.

So our passage for tonight is chapter 7, verses 2 to 16, which was read to us. Knock, knock.

Come in. Come in. Titus, my dear brother, what a joy to see you. Come and sit down. Coffee? Cheese sandwich? A little Greek yogurt? Now, my dear brother, we'll get straight to the point.

You're willing, are you, to go to Corinth for me? I am, Paul? I am. And you realize, don't you, that it's likely to be quite a difficult trip. Yes, Paul, I do.

But I'm willing to help you to grasp these nettles. We're in this together, up to the neck, aren't we, brother? We are indeed. So when can you go? Well, I've been down to the quayside.

[5 : 18] I've already booked myself a passage with a captain who's sailing for Corinth in two days' time. Excellent, excellent. Now, brother Titus, I have something in my hand for you to take.

It's a letter which I have written to the Corinthians. Now, friends, let me just break off for a moment. This is not either 1 Corinthians or 2 Corinthians. It's the letter mentioned in our passage at verse 8.

No copies have come down to us, but that's the letter Paul is giving to Titus. Here it is, Titus. It's a sharp, difficult letter. I want you to read it later today. I must confess I wept as I wrote parts of it, but I believe it's the only thing that I can do.

So the Lord be with you. I'll be praying for you, and I'll be praying for the Corinthian church every day while you're away. Six weeks later.

Knock, knock. Come in, come in. Titus! The Aegean Sea has spared you, and the Lord has returned you safely to me. Wonderful, wonderful. Sit yourself down. Coffee? Slice of Dundee cake?

[6 : 23] Those Scots are great bakers. Now, spill the beans, Titus. I can't wait. How did you get on? How did they receive you? And my letter. Well, Paul, the answer is wonderfully well.

I can tell you I was apprehensive, to put it mildly, when I met them first, as they waited for me at the quayside. But we went back to their place. We opened the letter. We sat down and read it together.

It upset them. But it upset them in exactly the right kind of way. They responded as Christians should. We had tears. We had powerful expressions of love for you, and longing to see you, and mourning over their waywardness.

It grieved them to see how upset you had been over their behavior. And they were falling over themselves to put things right. Well, we'll leave Paul and Titus to discuss these things late into the evening.

I'm sure they spent long over it. I've just tried in this last couple of minutes to give you the bare bones of the kind of conversation that is reflected in Paul's words here in verses 6, 7, 8, and 9 of our chapter 7.

[7 : 28] Now, trying to work out the exact history of Paul's relationship with the Corinthians and his journeying to and fro and everything that went on is quite tricky.

And I don't think anybody has pieced it all together perfectly. But certain things are pretty clear. And I'll try to describe them briefly because I think this will help us to understand 2 Corinthians chapter 7.

Paul first went to Corinth to preach the gospel in probably the year 50 AD. And he started up an evangelistic work. He met a couple named Aquila and Priscilla, who were Jews who had become Christians and who had been expelled from Rome because there was an anti-Semitic purge going on there.

So they'd come to Corinth. They met Paul and they shared their lodgings with Paul because they worked at the same trade. They were leather workers or tent makers. Then subsequently, Paul was joined by his companions Silas and Timothy.

They weren't there initially, but they came later to help him. And during his time there, he had a rough time with plenty of opposition. There's nothing new about that. He stayed upwards of 18 months in Corinth.

[8 : 39] He then went to Ephesus, then to Caesarea, then to Antioch, which was his home church, and then back to Ephesus. And all that information is clearly laid out in Acts chapter 18.

Having got to Ephesus, Paul stayed there for a long time, for over two years. But he kept in touch with the young Corinthian church. Now, Ephesus and Corinth lie roughly east and west of each other.

Ephesus is about 200 miles from Corinth. It's on the west coast of modern Turkey, and Corinth is quite near to Athens in Greece. So the two cities are separated by about 200 miles of the Aegean Sea.

Paul wrote the Corinthians an initial letter, a very first letter which has been lost. It's mentioned in 1 Corinthians, but we no longer have copies of it. Then some of the Corinthians came to visit Paul, bringing a letter with them from the church to him, in which they asked him for guidance on certain things, on marriage, on spiritual gifts, and food offered to idols, and a few other things.

Paul then sent Timothy, his senior lieutenant, across to help them and teach them. And Paul then wrote the long letter, which we know as 1 Corinthians, in which he answered the questions that they had put to him in their letter, and also correcting them pretty strongly in various areas where their Christian life was going astray.

[10 : 03] Paul himself, because he was so concerned for them, he subsequently paid them a short visit, short and clearly painful, because a strong resistance to Paul's authority was building up in parts of the congregation.

Paul then came back to Ephesus and wrote them another letter, the one he mentions here in chapter 7, verse 8. And this will have been the letter that he gave to Titus, who was his other senior lieutenant, to take across to them.

And after Titus returns from Corinth and meets Paul and tells him about his great encouragements, it's then that Paul writes to Corinthians to them. Now, I know all that sounds a little bit complicated, but the reason why I've taken some time to describe it is that it shows us just how much Paul was concerned for the church at Corinth, and indeed how much he loved the Corinthian Christians.

When he heard that the church was developing serious problems, he was absolutely determined to rescue the situation, if at all possible.

That's why he sent his two most senior and experienced people, first Timothy and then Titus, to them. And that's why he went back to Corinth himself. That's why he wrote at least four letters to them.

[11 : 18] And writing a letter in those days was a big operation, and getting the letter from A to B was a difficult job. And that's why he tells them in two Corinthians that he is preparing to visit them again.

So nothing is too much trouble for Paul. Think of it. He had spent over 18 months in that church, nurturing them in the Christian faith, and patiently teaching these young Christians the truth about Christ.

Now, Paul might have said, if he had been a different kind of man, he might have said, I'm fed up with them, blow them, they're a nuisance. They're not straightforward people, like the Philippians or the Thessalonians.

Why should I bother with them any longer? But he didn't say that, because they meant the world to him. Just look at how he talks in verse 3 of our chapter.

I said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together, by which I think he means, whether I live or die, you're bound up in my heart.

[12 : 22] You're in my heart while I live, and you will still be there while I'm drawing my last breaths. That's how much I love you. I think I had been reading 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians for about 20 years, before I began to see from these two letters how much Paul loved the members of this church.

I just didn't spot it for all that time. I've been reading these two letters as sharp disciplinary reproofs. Now, they are that, and we'll look at an aspect of that in just a moment.

But there is so much more in these two letters than reproof. There is a ton weight of love that lies behind the reproof. And verse 3 here in chapter 7 is a prime example of it.

And so is verse 4. I'm acting with great boldness towards you. Now, the word boldness literally means freedom of speech, the ability to say things freely.

What Paul means is, I'm holding nothing back from you. I'm emptying the contents of my heart out before you. I want you to know the full score. There's no point in us beating around the bush.

[13 : 29] And then reading on in verse 4, I have great pride in you. I'm filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I'm overflowing with joy. Now, the comfort and the joy really refer on to verse 7.

And that's the comfort that Paul received when Titus returned and told him how well the Corinthians had responded to Paul's difficult letter. And then verse 5 opens this up further still.

For even when we came into Macedonia, that's up in northeastern Greece where Paul had obviously arranged to meet Titus when he came back from Corinth. Even then, our bodies had no rest.

In other words, Paul's saying, I was upset, I was fidgety, I was anxious, I was troubled, I couldn't sleep. Afflictions everywhere, battles on the outside, fears on the inside.

But God, just notice that great Bible phrase, which so often indicates a turning point. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

[14 : 44] In other words, it was the news of you that turned my wretchedness into joy. Yes, it was a tonic to see Titus, but it was the news of you that filled my heart with sunshine.

Well, I hope I'm persuading you from the text here of Paul's passionate and committed love for his Corinthian friends. He is not going to let them go. They're wrapped up in his heart, in life and in death.

Now, what I want to do for the rest of our time this evening is to observe from the chapter how Paul's committed love for the Corinthians expresses itself.

What does a pastor's love for his people look like? If we can learn from Paul what it meant for him to love the fellowship at Corinth, we'll learn valuable lessons about what it means, not just for pastors, but for all of us, to exercise true and responsible love towards our fellow Christians.

So I want us to notice three things from the passage, three things that Paul regarded as essentials. First, Paul knew that it was essential that the church be disciplined.

[15 : 55] And it was this commitment to good discipline that caused Paul to write the letter that he mentions in verse 8, this letter that we no longer have sight of. So let me read verse 8 again.

For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it, though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while.

Why did the letter grieve them? Because in it, Paul was facing the Corinthians with some serious bad behavior that had to be put right. And I think we have a clue in verse 12 what this bad behavior was.

So here's verse 12. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God.

Now it seems to have been about a particular difficulty caused by one individual who had injured another individual. We can't be certain what that injury was, though it's a fair guess to say that the one injured may have been Paul himself, and the one who injured him may have been the ringleader of a group of folk within the church who were seeking to undermine Paul's authority as an apostle and teacher.

[17 : 16] But whatever the problem was, Paul's letter must have urged the congregation to deal with this troublemaker so as to prevent his corrupting influence working its way through the church.

Paul knew that one troublemaker, if he's not stopped, can ruin the life of a church by spreading rumors, by telling untruths, by smearing reputations, and undermining the authority of leaders.

Now what kind of a man did Paul have to be to write a letter like that? Well clearly, he found it a very difficult task.

He says, halfway through verse 8, that initially he regretted sending it because he knew it was going to cause grief. But he was prepared to cause grief because he knew that repentance and change would only come about if discipline was exercised.

And it has been well said that no one can be a good church leader if he is unwilling ever to cause pain. Now it's true of any human institution that if it's going to run happily, if it's going to fulfill its proper purpose, there has to be a wholesome discipline.

[18 : 32] A hospital, a number of you work for the NHS, don't you? You know that a hospital can't function properly without good discipline, nor can a school. The House of Commons has to have a code of behavior and a speaker who knows the rules of debate if it's to get through its business and not collapse into disorder.

A family has to have a healthy and loving discipline. So for example, if the family has a teenage son who is beginning to behave badly, his parents have to bring him into line and show him clearly where the boundaries lie.

They exercise discipline, not because they want to tyrannize over their son's life, but because they want to help him to see that a disciplined life will be a happy and fruitful life, whereas an undisciplined life will in the end be wretched and wasted.

Now the Lord's Church above any other institution needs to be well disciplined if it is to function happily and well.

And Paul knew this better than anybody. Who disciplines the church? The Lord does because he is its head and its leader.

[19 : 43] And how do we learn the Lord's discipline? From the Bible. It's the Bible that teaches us how to live the Christian life. Now the fundamental disciplines or the heart of the disciplines of the Bible come to us in the form of the Ten Commandments which teach us to honor the Lord, to honor family structures, our parents and our marriages, and they lay upon us the healthy discipline of not killing each other.

That's why you feel safe sitting next to the person you're sitting next to. Not stealing from each other, not committing adultery, not telling lies and so on. The Ten Commandments are productive of human happiness and we know that.

And we know that if we depart from them we reap a harvest of misery and wretchedness and disorder. And how, in practice, on the ground, does the Lord exercise the disciplines of the Bible in the church?

Well, it happens through one another and especially through our ministers and elders and other responsible and experienced Christians. And this means that when a person becomes a member of the church, that person is joining a community where discipline operates.

A community of people who are disciplined by the Lord Jesus through the words of the Bible and lovingly exercised by the more senior members of the church. Now, friends, it is a wonderful thing to be part of a community like that.

[21 : 14] It is a great privilege to belong to a community who love each other sufficiently well to be prepared to exercise godly discipline. Now, this would mean for me that I know that if I misbehave, my bad behavior is not going to be ignored.

Senior and responsible fellow members of the church would come to me and they would come quickly and they would call me to account lovingly and firmly. And if I didn't quickly repent, they would remove me, quite rightly, from positions of responsibility and leadership.

Now, it's love that lies behind church discipline. Paul wrote these disciplinary letters to the church at Corinth because he loved that church so much.

He was not prepared to see it run into the buffers and collapse. One of the problems with all too many churches these days is that there is not sufficient determined love in ministers and other senior people to exercise a healthy discipline.

So, in some congregations, if Mr. So-and-so misbehaves and if the ministers and the elders say, let's not make difficulties for ourselves, let's not open up any cans of worms, we won't tackle the problem, we'll just let him be and we'll hope that the problem sorts itself out.

[22 : 37] that's what so often happens. Now, that is a failure of love and an abdication of responsibility. And a church whose leaders have that kind of attitude is on the road to meltdown.

Let's pray that our church never gets itself into that kind of situation. It would be a failure to take the lordship of Christ seriously to behave like that.

Paul loved the church at Corinth so much that he wrote them a letter that he knew was going to cause them pain. And we too need to follow Paul's example. When somebody, one of us, is falling into sin or causing trouble, we must go to them, face them with the problem, and help them to change course.

Look again at verses eight and nine. Even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it. I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while.

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

[23 : 46] Quite the opposite. Things made progress. You were grieved, he is saying, into repentance. That's why Paul rejoiced. He was like the surgeon who has to cut in order to heal.

That letter cut deep, but it brought healing. So for us to belong to a church where a loving and healthy discipline is exercised is a great blessing and it's a great privilege.

It's a safety net for us. If I step out of line, I know that I shall be quickly hauled back into line. One of the things that makes many churches shy away from good discipline is the exaggerated individualism of our society today.

Just think of the way people regard themselves and each other. Each individual is set up onto a kind of pedestal and encouraged to design his own life and his own lifestyle.

Does it suit you? Does it please you to design your own ethics? Do so. Feel free. And woe to anybody who resists you. You have a right to self-determination.

[24 : 54] Find your own methods and stick to them. Discover yourself. Find out who you are. And having found out who you are, run with what you find. Plough your own furrow.

Cut your own course. Nobody has the right to gainsay you. That's what the world says today, doesn't it? But Paul said to the Corinthians, my brothers, you are wrong.

And you and I will grow strong, will only grow strong in the Christian life if we're willing to come down off that individualized pedestal and submit to the loving disciplines of the Lord Jesus expressed in the Bible and exercised in the local congregation.

So there's the first thing. Paul loved the church so much that he was willing to discipline its members when they were going wrong. Now, discipline is one thing, but the question is, does discipline lead to change?

So our second expression of Paul's love for the church is his delight on hearing of their repentance. Verse 9 again, as it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting.

[26 : 07] Paul had no wish to hurt them for the sake of hurting them. But if the hurt and grief led them to repentance, to a real change of heart and mind, then he certainly rejoiced.

And you'll see that in verses 9 and 10, he distinguishes between what he calls godly grief and worldly grief. Let me pick it up halfway through verse 9.

For you felt a godly grief so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

That's pretty stark, isn't it? What is worldly grief? Worldly grief is where a person hangs his head in remorse and bitterness and says, woe is me.

I'm trapped in the gruesome consequences of my own stupidity and willfulness. If only I'd thought of the consequences of my actions before it all came to this. But now I'm ruined.

[27 : 08] There's no hope for me. I'm a wretched relic of a human being. Isn't that what Paul means by worldly grief that produces death? But godly grief is quite different.

The wrongs committed may be just as serious, but the sinner's conscience is brought to life and he looks up to God with hope and with the desire to be forgiven and brought into line with God's will.

And this is what Paul is describing in verse 11. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment.

At every point, you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. In other words, they have immediately acknowledged the problem, they've acknowledged the sin, rather than saying, I've done nothing wrong.

They've acknowledged the sin. And having acknowledged the sin, they have wanted, as soon as possible, to get in the right with both God and Paul. They've expressed in the words of verse 11, indignation at the sin and perhaps at the ringleader of the problem.

[28 : 18] They've expressed fear, a healthy fear of God's antagonism towards their sin. Longing, longing to know that they're forgiven. Zeal, to follow the Lord truly.

Punishment, yes, a willingness to punish the offender and set their house at Corinth in order. Now verse 12, which has an interesting and unexpected element in it.

I'll read the verse, but I'll expand it and paraphrase it as I go along. So, although I wrote to you about the offense and about the offender and about the one offended, my reason for writing was not primarily about that local matter of the offense and the offender.

My bigger reason for writing was so that your earnestness for us, us being me and Timothy and Titus, your loyalty and commitment to us might be shown up, might be revealed, not so that we should see it, but so that, and here's the unexpected moment, so that you should know it, that it might be revealed to you in the sight of God.

And you see what Paul is saying there. Of course, he is keen to know that the Corinthians are earnest in their commitment and their loyalty to him, but he's even keener to know that they acknowledge their wholehearted commitment to him as their teacher and their apostle.

[29 : 44] What Paul wants, after all the excitement has died down, is for the Corinthians to say to each other, Paul is our teacher, brothers and sisters, isn't he?

We mustn't follow these false leaders who have wormed their way into our fellowship. Paul is the true example of Christian life and teaching for us to follow. He is the one commissioned by Christ to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

The big issue throughout 2 Corinthians is the question of whether the Corinthians are going to distance themselves from Paul as their false leaders are trying to get them to do, or whether they are gladly going to resubmit themselves to the authority with which Paul has been invested by Christ himself.

And that is one of the great issues that confronts the 21st century churches. Will Paul be sidelined? Will he be, as it were, demoted?

Will he be marginalized because his teaching is so much at odds with the spirit of the age? The language of this is rather quaint, but I'd like to read you the old Anglican prayer, which appears in the Book of Common Prayer, composed about four or five hundred years ago, to be said on the day in the Anglican calendar when the conversion of Paul is annually celebrated.

[31 : 06] Here is the prayer. O God, who through the preaching of the blessed apostle Saint Paul has caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world, grant, we beseech thee, that we, having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may show forth our thankfulness unto thee for the same by following the holy doctrine which he taught.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Now, a prayer like that shows, in the words of our verse 12, an earnestness for Paul being revealed in the sight of God.

So there's the second thing. Paul's love for the church is shown in the joy he takes in seeing the evidence of their repentance. So we have necessary discipline leading to godly repentance, leading to, thirdly, and I'll be brief here because we have business to do yet, thirdly, joyful, affectionate, refreshing confidence.

The final paragraph here from verse 13 to verse 16 has many ins and outs, but I just want to focus on one thing from it, and that is the quality of the relationships which Paul so greatly values, the relationships between himself and Titus and the Corinthians.

He ends the paragraph, do you see, by saying, I rejoice because I have perfect confidence in you. His confidence in the Corinthians had greatly wavered.

[32 : 41] It had almost been blown out of the water, but when Titus returned after his difficult disciplinary mission, Paul was filled with joy at everything Titus reported.

Look at verse 13, and besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.

So Paul is saying, I was half expecting Titus to come back to me exhausted and drained and despondent, but quite the opposite, his face was beaming with joy as he reported on how you received him.

Look at verse 15, and his affection for you is even greater as he remembers the obedience of you all how you received him with fear and trembling. So what this paragraph speaks of is the joyful depth and quality of the relationships enjoyed by Paul and Titus, and also now with the Corinthians after the problem has been resolved.

So Paul is opening to us a window on the church. He's showing us how Christians lovingly take one another really seriously. If there is sin, it must be addressed.

[33 : 55] When there is repentance, there is joy, and the bonds of fellowship are strengthened. Paul loves the Lord's church, and Paul teaches us how to love the Lord's church.

Now let me say this to encourage those who are becoming new members this evening. You are, of course, already in reality members of the Lord's universal church because you have already repented and put your trust in Christ.

But tonight in this service, you are being formally received into membership of this congregation of the universal church. The church of Christ is loved by Paul, and more importantly still, the church of Christ is loved by the Lord Jesus.

who laid down his life for each of its members. And this is why the church is a different kind of society from any other human society.

I guess that most of us belong to societies and clubs and groupings of many kinds. Many of you work for a firm or a company or the National Health Service, or you study at school or at college or at university.

[35 : 08] Perhaps you belong to the rambling club or the tennis club. Or even the Beef Farmers Association brackets poultry section. As I do.

Membership costs one pound a year. Now those associations, we all belong to different associations, they're good for us. They're good to belong to because work is good for us and because recreation is good for us.

But there is nothing like the church. church. Our human societies and clubs are earthly. But the church has its origin in heaven, its lord is in heaven, and its destiny is in heaven.

The church is everlasting. And to belong to it is the greatest privilege and joy that any human being can know. In no other human society will we receive loving discipline when we go astray.

No other human society is interested in the repentance of the heart. But these are the hallmarks of the Lord's people. Paul's love for the church shines through the pages of 2 Corinthians.

[36 : 20] and he calls us to follow his example and to love deeply and joyfully those for whom the Lord Jesus laid down his life.

Let us pray together. We thank you again, dear Lord Jesus, for this wonderful fellowship worldwide and everlasting.

for which you were prepared to die and for which you were raised. And tonight as we celebrate membership of the church, we thank you so much for all these things and we pray that deep in our hearts you will write ever deeper a sense of joy and love for the church and commitment to it.

And we ask it for your dear name's sake. Amen. Amen.