

Ideal/Real Project

**Presented to
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**In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Course
Systematic Theology 105A: Sanctification and Ecclesiology**

By

December 19, XXXX

Matt's notes:

Note that this sample does not match exactly your assignment but is intended to give you a basic overview of the project.

Information in all caps has been redacted to protect the privacy of those involved. This is a sample project. Your project does not have to follow the form or outline of this project. This is not presented as the perfect project but merely as a sample of how one student implemented the project. This is not a sample to show comprehensive coverage of all areas or to show precisely how to implement the project—you have more freedom in choosing what you emphasize. Some of the things you choose to emphasize might not be reflected below. Follow the instructions in the syllabus very closely in areas to consider and address—even if you just note there are no issues to be addressed in a particular area.

“Ideal” – How is My Church Doing?

General Description

NAME WITHHELD CHURCH (THE CHURCH) is in LOCALE, Texas, a town of about XX,000 people in a county of about XX,000 residents, and is LOCATION WITHHELD. The Church is INFORMATION ON LOCATION REDACTED. It is, therefore, in a very visible location, and because of its size, it can't be missed. It is a church of about XXXX members, with a “typical” Sunday school and morning worship attendance of about half that. INFORMATION REDACTED. Membership has been stable for many years now, a cause of great concern among some in leadership roles. INFORMATION ON FOUNDING OF CHURCH REDACTED. INFORMATION ON SERVICE DETAILS AND POSITIONS HELD REDACTED

The Church's Government and Offices

THE CHURCH is congregational in its approach to decision-making, with “big” decisions happening at monthly church business meetings, typically on a Wednesday night, with perhaps one-tenth of the members in attendance. Prior to these meetings, there has been a process that might have involved either paid church staff and/or a lay committee hammering out a proposal for a change in the status quo. Their recommendation is then typically brought before THE CHURCH'S DEACON COUNCIL for their approval. This group of XX men is an elected sub-set of the total deacon body (about XX men) and almost functions like an elder board. In general, if a committee or a staff person brings a proposal forward and THE CHURCH'S DEACON COUNCIL recommends approval, the vote carries at the monthly business meeting. An

exception to this process is made for the hiring of ministry staff, but the only significant difference is that the church votes on a Sunday morning, not on a Wednesday night.

The three officers of THE CHURCH'S DEACON COUNCIL form a key group that meets with the pastor regularly and on an as-needed basis. The paid staff includes the senior pastor, the minister of praise and worship, the minister of education and evangelism, the minister of youth and college, a leader of preschool and children's ministry, and several administrative assistants and maintenance personnel. There are numerous committees (recently re-named "ministries") that monitor and make recommendations regarding various activities of the church. It is my impression that policy decisions happen formally through the process outlined above, but there are many other important implementation decisions that occur on a day-to-day basis that are simply decided by staff members, under the direction of the senior pastor. There are also many other plans or projects that come up in committee or are brought to the staff by individuals that simply never move forward because of what is essentially a staff veto. To note a personal example, I felt strongly that we should, as a church, focus our foreign mission efforts on a single unreached people group, rather than continue in the apparently haphazard way we have for years. I shared this idea with our former pastor (a very dear friend who left to go to another church in the XXXX of XXXX) who simply did not share my vision, and that is where the idea died. It would have been "possible" for me to "go over his head" by taking the idea to THE CHURCH'S DEACON COUNCIL, but that did not seem appropriate to me. In a "plurality of elders" model, I imagine an idea having more opportunity for discussion among those "peers," with one person being less able to have a "veto." (But, perhaps I am a bit naïve.)

NAME WITHHELD BAPTIST CHURCH is a part of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), a large group composed of like-minded churches that are independent and congregational, but choose to cooperate in the areas of missions, education and public policy (primarily). At the state level THE CHURCH is, for the time being, affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT). (We have, however, divided our financial contribution between the SBC and the BGCT in recent years rather than giving it all to the BGCT, since they have substantially reduced their giving to the SBC.) The BGCT has moved away from the SBC doctrinally, primarily by stepping away from a commitment to biblical inerrancy and by an unwillingness to endorse the SBC doctrinal statement, the Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M). Another more conservative group has formed at the state level, the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. I expect our church to re-align with this group at some point in the future. Affiliations with these groups do not impact our independence as a local body; the relationships simply allow us to have a broader impact through cooperation, and the larger bodies derive their satisfaction by serving churches like ours.

The Church's Mission

The purpose statement in our constitution states that

EXACT MISSION STATEMENT REDACTED

In this section, I will limit my discussion to missions and evangelism, deferring an examination of worship and discipleship to subsequent sections. THE CHURCH is a very missions-minded church, dedicating 25% of its annual budget to domestic and foreign missions. At least 10% of the budget is given to the Cooperative Program of the SBC. Through the Cooperative Program we are able to support missions worldwide and

domestically. We currently have XXXX church members serving the Lord through an agency of the International Mission Board in XXXX and XXXX in XXXX. These are “creative access countries” not open to missionaries. Varying amounts are given to diverse ministries including the support of a local Hispanic pastor, a XXXX missionary in XXXX, the widow of a pastor in XXXX, a pilot with MAF, a XXXX pastor serving in XXXX, and others. Part of the budget is committed to benevolence work within XXXX County by supporting a local Christian social service agency, in part through another church that has a food pantry, and in part through direct financial help to people in need. The church has been very supportive of our people who have done short-term trips with other agencies, helping one woman as she went to XXXX to teach English, another young man who is in a XXXX closed country right now with Campus Crusade, and even my daughter when she went to XXXX with XXXX to do Christian sports camps.

The church regularly organizes mission trips abroad and domestically for adults and youth. In recent years, adults have been to XXXX (twice as we have now had different individuals there for about six years), XXXX, XXXX, XXXX and XXXXX. Our youth have focused on domestic needs, for many years serving in camps for mentally challenged adults and, more recently serving with an inner-city ministry in XXXX the last two summers. Our new pastor has a great passion for missions and I expect to see him give much energy and emphasis to this area.

In the area of evangelism, we suffer from the general lack of enthusiasm common in American churches. THE CHURCH has had various discipleship courses including MasterLife with a significant portion of the course dedicated to evangelism training, as well as courses like Evangelism Explosion that are solely about witnessing. People are

repeatedly encouraged from the pulpit and in Bible study to share the gospel, but my sense is that most do not practice this much in their lives. There are, of course, shining examples of people whose delight with God overflows in their relationships with others, but they are the exception, which is probably part of why we have not seen many adult conversions over the last 10 or 15 years. It would seem that others in XXXX are walking more obediently in this area and God is blessing their churches with the harvest of His elect. Again our new pastor's passion is in the areas of missions and evangelism ("soul-winning"), so I expect more emphasis in this area from the pulpit and in discipleship training. I do have reservations, however, and they center on his revivalistic and Arminian theology and style. I realize this is not uncommon in Southern Baptist churches, but I have been blessed to have been under a Reformed and Baptist pastor for the last ten years. My own search for theological understanding has placed me in the Reformed Baptist subculture within the SBC, so this change in the teaching regarding soteriology from the pulpit has been quite distressing for me, almost driving a change in churches. I will address this more completely under "Special Concerns," below.

The Church's Ordinances

Consistent with our tradition, we practice the baptism of people who profess faith in Christ and do so by immersion. This happens whenever someone professes faith in Christ and after someone on the church staff has spent enough time with them to be reasonably confident that they have come to trust Christ. At that point, the ceremony is planned for a day of the candidate's choosing, usually on a Sunday morning, and usually

fairly soon after their profession. Preceding the actual baptism, the minister performing it usually says a few words to explain our theology regarding baptism.

The Lord's Supper is an occasional event, perhaps once a quarter, usually on a Sunday night. It is a somewhat formal ceremony, with the bread and juice being distributed by some deacons. Again, there is an explanation of our beliefs, particularly with respect to the symbolic nature of the ordinance. Our denominational doctrinal statement (BF&M) indicates that we endorse the idea of "closed communion," with the participation limited to church members, but that is not practiced at THE CHURCH. Essentially, anyone of like faith is encouraged to partake.

The Church's Discipleship

Discipleship at THE CHURCH is accomplished through Bible teaching and prayer and growing through opportunities for service and outreach. Bible study happens in Sunday School on Sunday mornings for all ages, as well as on Sunday evenings where topical studies are offered to adults. There is also usually at least one weekday study targeted for women, oftentimes either a Precept Bible study or a Beth Moore Bible study. Until recently, we had missions-focused training for children (Royal Ambassadors for boys and Girls in Action for the girls). A few months ago, THE CHURCH changed to the AWANA program.

There are two opportunities for worship on Sundays (am & pm) and also a prayer meeting/Bible study on Wednesday nights. Our new pastor has also begun a XXXX small group discipleship experience and there are also many members involved in informal accountability relationships.

Service opportunities include mission trips as well as the ongoing chance to be involved in a local food pantry and a crisis pregnancy center. There are also many opportunities to serve the people of the church through its many committees, through volunteer work on the physical plant and to serve the pastoral staff by sharing the visitation load. Outreach happens through an organized plan to contact visitors and new community members through home visits, as well as by phone contacts and by mail.

The Church's Discipline

Church discipline at THE CHURCH has been handled privately and, as a result, I know very little about the details. On a case-by-case basis, people have been asked to step down from positions of visible ministry when that has been felt to be appropriate. People have also been encouraged to become involved with another church when it was believed that their continued presence would fuel ongoing strife. These events have been rare, probably reflecting a “minimalist” approach to church discipline. My perception is that leaders want to avoid conflict at all costs, and hope that those with “problems” will simply go away if “left alone” long enough. This approach is changing with our new pastor, who has a commitment to aggressively using church discipline as a tool for restoration and accountability. He had good success with this at his previous church and he is convinced that if you practice church discipline God’s way, it will be good for your church as well as for the people involved.

The Church's Doctrine

The Baptist Faith and Message is our foundational doctrinal statement. Saying that, however, does not mean that it is referenced with any regularity by church members to evaluate the message being taught in Bible study or from the pulpit. There is simply an

underlying assumption that the teacher is faithful to that statement. Copies of the statement are readily available at the church, but I am almost confident that very few church members are very familiar with it. There is also a disappointing (to me) attitude from leadership that Southern Baptist distinctives are unimportant. At times, it seems as though there is a desire to move in the direction of a more inclusive, and less demanding, statement, perhaps like that of the National Association of Evangelicals. This is sometimes communicated with a tone of disdain for “carefulness” (my term) regarding doctrine. There seems to be a growing mood that careful theology divides and division among Christian is a bigger problem than careless theology (to be discussed further under “Special Concerns,” below).

The Church’s Worship

In this section, I will be primarily be describing how THE CHURCH does music in corporate worship. While I understand that worship includes many things (e.g., giving, praying, preaching/listening, and serving), I believe THE CHURCH consistently includes all those other aspects of corporate worship faithfully. Regarding music, THE CHURCH is in a time of transition from what could be described as “traditional” to “blended.” Until recently, our worship was led by a music minister who had been serving God faithfully in that role for over 30 years. When our new pastor came, the music minister felt it was finally time to retire, having actually stayed longer than he had intended because of the unexpected departure of our previous pastor. (He did not feel it was best for THE CHURCH to lose both key leaders at once.) However, our worship style, because of his cultural background and age was definitely “traditional.” Worship services were very structured with little change from week to week and a preponderance of the music was

hymns that were between 50 and 150 years old. With his departure, we have moved away from using hymnals to using projected words on a screen, from mainly hymns to mainly praise choruses. There has been some “unrest,” with some resultant swing back in the direction of a few more hymns. On Sunday evenings, music has been led by a “praise team” with guitars, percussion, and keyboards. For THE CHURCH, this was a “huge” step. As an aside, the preaching has been supplemented by PowerPoint outlines on the screen as well. There has also been encouragement from the pulpit for folks to not be shy about expressions of worship. As a result, there is more raising of hands, more verbal expression during the service, and more praying occurring at the altar during the services - so as to not “quench the Spirit” (the pastor’s words, not mine).

Special Concern #1 – Lay Leadership

As described above, the church primarily functions with a congregational style of government with a strong pastor role and an “advise and consent” function given to the XXXX. The two main problems with this are the miscasting of the role of deacons in the church and the absence of elders other than the pastor. I will address each of these concerns separately. Regarding deacons, it is a long-standing tradition in Baptist churches that these are the men who “run the church.” When there are leadership problems in a church, it is usually the result of a power struggle between the pastor and some of the deacons, when both the pastor and the deacons may want to get their own way. At THE CHURCH, some of this has been avoided by the way THE CHURCH’S DEACON COUNCIL functions, with men automatically rotating off every three years and having to be elected to THE CHURCH’S DEACON COUNCIL again, after at least one year off. This was written into the founding constitution, because of what was perceived to be the

opportunity for misuse of the power of that position at the church from which they split. However, it would be naïve to assume that simply because someone is not on THE CHURCH'S DEACON COUNCIL they are unable to wield influence. But, the more fundamental problem is rooted in the fact that deacons were not given this role of governance in the bible. There have been a few attempts over the years to more carefully define the role of deacons as servants of the church, but the implementation has been ineffective. Of special note is a constitutional amendment that carefully laid out a vision for a "deacon family ministry" that would have involved each deacon being assigned about XXXX households that he would be responsible for serving spiritually. This concept functioned somewhat haphazardly for about six months and then died, I believe, because of a lack of accountability and follow-through. There is a developing consensus, under our pastor's leadership, that we must move toward a more biblical role of deacons.

Likewise, our pastor is convinced that churches trying to be guided by Scripture need to be led by elders. He has a vision of a small body of men being intimately involved in leadership with him. These men would function as prayer partners and accountability partners, holding him back when he has ideas that are not in the best interest of the church. He sees a plurality of elders making decisions, but clearly feels that the pastor should be the "leader among leaders." He believes this "elder board" could also be a more effective body for handling issues of church discipline. He has led the deacon body through a study of elders, including expecting each of the deacons to read *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch.

Special Concern #2 – Theological Drift

THE CHURCH, like many churches within evangelicalism, is getting caught up in the spirit of the age theologically. This is an incredibly complicated issue, discussed by theologian/writers with much more insight than I, men like Mark Noll, David Wells, and Douglas Groothuis, among many others. There are many facets to this concern and I will focus on a couple. My discussion of these concerns will focus on our new pastor. It is obvious, however, that this theological drift in the pulpit could not have happened if the pastor search committee had been concerned about these things or if anyone in leadership other than a couple of us were expressing our concerns. At a fundamental level, there is a very real lack of theological precision from the pulpit. This shows itself most often through careless phrasing of sentences that are easily misunderstood. A recent example was a sermon on husband-wife relationships, in part using Ephesians 5, in which mutual submission was discussed with no clarification about the real meaning of the text. Our pastor is definitely not an egalitarian, but his explanation of the phrase could have easily been given by someone in that camp. He identified himself to our search committee as a “four point Calvinist,” but he has, at various times, ridiculed every one of the “five points” except preservation of the saints. Again, it’s very difficult to know where he stands because he will frequently say things that are contradictory, sometimes very closely together. His definitions are frequently “soft” as well, often using what I might call “Christian cliches” (the kinds of phrases you might here on Christian television like the “700 Club”), making a clear understanding of his theology difficult.

A second area of theological drift is the movement towards a more Arminian theology of salvation. Words like “decisionism” and “revivalism” would seem to accurately describe the communication of the gospel at THE CHURCH since our pastor

has arrived. There is a tremendous emphasis on “free will” and “choice” and a corresponding de-emphasis on God’s sovereignty in salvation. I really believe that if he were pushed to the logical conclusion of his expressed views, he would be semi-Pelagian, if not Pelagian. It is very easy to see what is happening at THE CHURCH now to be a direct consequence of Finney and his influence on American evangelicalism. Success in ministry and in worship is being defined by the numerical results obtained. There is much “cajoling” at the end of the services to encourage a “decision.”

Finally, a third area of special concern is a move towards what I will call “soft Pentecostalism.” While there has not been (as of yet) an encouragement of the expression of “sign gifts” like tongues, there has been much talk of “sensing the Spirit’s presence” in our services in “a special way.” This is usually expressed when there has been some visible response to an invitation. There has likewise been much talk of “responding to the Spirit” by “coming to the altar” and of not “quenching the Spirit” by not responding. It is easy to imagine someone who has a sensitive heart being “bullied” by this sort of appeal into thinking they were sinning if they don’t answer the invitation. It is very interesting to me that the emphasis is usually on “coming to the altar” rather than turning from sin to Christ. At a very basic level, and undoubtedly an oversimplification, it would seem that we are moving towards an emphasis on evaluating our worship by our feelings rather than by the truth of the music being sung and the message being preached.

“Real” – Where Do We Go from Here?

Introduction

Some general comments would seem to be appropriate prior to addressing the specific “special concerns” described. When our pastor was invited to preach in view of a call, it was mentioned that he was a widower, but would soon be marrying a woman who had been a family friend for many years. The fact that she was divorced and that there might be a theological/ecclesiological issue worth discussing was not ever mentioned by the pulpit committee publicly. There were open forums held, one for the deacons and their wives, as well as one to which the entire church was invited where he briefly explained the situation, but the issue was never mentioned in church where the whole body of members that was voting was present. I had significant reservations about this situation, expressed them to him privately, but was strongly encouraged by certain lay leaders to not be a source of dissension by bringing this up publicly. So I did not. In the context of that conversation, as well as others since then, he has told me how much he values my willingness to share my concerns with him. He has said that people like me sharpen him and he appreciates that. However, I have gotten very little response to my concerns beyond “thanks.” He has told me that he is not generally inclined to debate theology publicly because he thinks it distracts from the task of winning the lost, but I am coming to believe he simply doesn’t like debating theology PERIOD. As you will be able to tell, I share his views on changes needed regarding lay leadership (with some finely nuanced differences only), but it goes without saying that we are miles apart on “Special Concern #2.”

Special Concern #1 – Lay Leadership

I am entirely supportive of moving deacons from their current role of governing to the role of serving. I would like to see consideration given to reviving the failed deacon family ministry. As a deacon currently serving (for one more year) on the XXXXXXXXXXXX, I will support our pastor as he leads us in this direction. The plan at this point is to proceed with a church-wide educational effort to explain what the Bible teaches on this topic. This will primarily be happening from the pulpit, but if asked to do so, I will gladly do this in the Sunday School class I teach as well (mostly older adults). This will be an interesting process because people are, in general, so resistant to change. “This is how it has always been done” is such a common refrain. I can imagine there might be deacons who would feel like their influence might be threatened and others who might have no desire to serve the staff and the people. I think it would be a wonderful change of emphasis if deacons’ meeting were no longer times of hearing reports and voting, but were rather times when we were held accountable for serving the households assigned to us and encouraged by the leadership in that role.

The task of adding elders to the hierarchy of the church will be the bigger task. I believe that the Bible models the plurality of elders as the normal way of doing church government, but I anticipate resistance to this “Presbyterian” teaching from the “dyed-in-the-wool” Baptists in our fellowship. The BF&M describes pastors and deacons as the scriptural officers of the church. As a result, it will have to be explained that elder and pastor and bishop are synonymous terms and that to use the word elder does not imply inconsistency with our historic doctrinal position, even though this approach is a change in the practical working-out of the underlying theology. As above, the plan is for a

vigorous teaching of the pertinent Bible passages from the pulpit. It has also been communicated to the church that the staff and deacons believe this is the way we should be moving. The seed has been planted. Now it needs time to germinate and grow under this watering with the Word. Where my pastor and I might disagree is on some of the details of how elders should function. I believe he sees them mainly as partners in his vision for ministry with an occasional “holding back” when he leans forward too far. I prefer the concept of a group of equals, not overly influenced by one man’s vision. In this opportunity to make a significant change in how we do church, I have a unique opportunity to partner with our pastor because of my role as chairman of the XXXX Committee (I mean “XXXX Ministry”) for the next two years. I hope to model our constitutional revision after that of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis because of the great respect I have for their pastor, John Piper. I am sure he has developed a model for the rest of us to learn from because of his careful thinking as well as his great passion for truth and for doing things God’s way. I do think these changes, along with our cooperation within the Southern Baptist Convention would get us to the “Pynian” model of “Prebygationalism” (which is, of course, the most biblical ecclesiological model).

Special Concern #2 – Theological Drift

This is the much harder of the two concerns. I feel like a salmon swimming upriver, against the forces of cultural history (American evangelical revivalism) and modern popular culture. Frankly, I am not very hopeful about my ability to effect change in this area. Nevertheless, I do believe I am supposed to be at THE CHURCH for the foreseeable future and I hope I can pull us back toward a more Reformed understanding

of Scriptural truth. There is an acronym that Piper teaches¹ that applies to most tasks I feel called to engage in . . . APTAT:

Acknowledge your inability to do good on your own.

Pray for divine enablement.

Trust the promises of God for help and strength and guidance.

Act in obedience to God's Word.

Thank God for whatever good comes.

So, what do I see myself doing under the auspices of "Act?" I will continue to pray for my pastor regularly. I will pray for a pure and humble heart and against a critical spirit (you can see I have a lot of need in both of those areas). I will share my concerns with him when I feel led to do so. I will think carefully before sharing any concerns or criticisms. I will pray for elders who have a passion for true doctrine as well as passion for the lost. (I should say that I have told my pastor that I wish I had more of his passion for the lost. It went without saying that I wished he shared my passion for sound teaching, but I did not think saying that would be helpful.)

¹ Online text of a sermon preached on Galatians 3:1-5 on March 13, 1983.
<http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper83/031383m.htm>