I. Individualism: Selfish or Gospel-Centered

A fire burns most brightly when the logs are close to each other. The flames feed on each other and the combustible power of each log is greatly magnified. The way to put the fire out is to separate the logs.

The church works the same way. The closer and more committed we get to each other the greater the glory to God and the more effective our testimony to a watching world. The purpose of this morning’s sermon is to help us remove a crucial impediment to getting closer and bringing more glory to God.

Geert Hofstede, a student of culture, has published data on the degree to which cultures are individualistic. Of all the nations Hofstede has studied, the U.S. is the most individualistic culture in the world, maybe in world history.

As we think about our relationship to the local church, it is important to reflect on our culture, its strengths and weaknesses, for we are products of our culture. In some cases, North American culture strengthens our relationship with the local church. In other ways it weakens our relationship with the local church. The objective of today’s sermon is to help us know ourselves and consequently serve God more affectively. I want to start with some imaginary scenarios.

Frank doesn’t want to attend church. He is tired, so he sleeps in. Although he is a member of his church, he doesn’t see a need to push himself. On Sunday morning it’s all about Frank and his comfort.

Suzette doesn’t want to go to HomeGroup. She hasn’t been getting anything out of it lately anyway. And besides, Survivor is on. She needs a break, so she doesn’t call her HomeGroup leader. She just ignores the group. She prepares some popcorn, turns on TV, tunes in, and forgets her responsibilities.

Tim’s HomeGroup has decided to help one of their members move on Saturday morning. When the email went out asking for help, Tim ignored it. Saturday is his sleep in day. He feels some loyalty to his small group, but he doesn’t want to get too boxed in, too constricted by commitments, so he just sleeps in.

Frank, Suzette and Tim are acting as free individuals. However, their freedom, their individualism, is a radical departure from the individualism promoted by God’s Word.
This is exactly how millions of Christians relate to Christianity. To them Christianity is about me and God. Some reject church membership. Others belong to a local church but refuse to make sacrifices for the good of the local church.

I hope to convince you of two things this morning. First, it is a contradiction in terms to be a Christian, and not be a member of a local church. Second, to be a member of a local church means self-sacrifice for the mission and glory of God in the local church.

Christianity presumes many doctrines not specifically stated in scripture. It does so because, without these doctrines, we cannot understand the Bible. The Trinity is one of these doctrines. It is never stated specifically. It doesn’t need to be because the New Testament assumes it on every page. The doctrine of the church works the same way. Only one text tells us to go to church regularly.

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

We don’t need more biblical support than this. Why? Because every page of the New Testament just presumes the church and its importance. The idea of a Christian not committed to a local church is foreign to the pages of the Bible. The Bible was written in what Anthropologists call a strong-group culture, i.e. a culture that emphasized the success of the group more than the success of the individual, a culture whose individual found their identity in the group to which they belonged.

For example, all of the Epistles, except the pastorals, were written to specific local churches. In addition, the biblical metaphors for the church are all communal. In our commitment to and need for each other we are like a body (1 Cor. 12). In our relationship to Christ we are a Bride for him to love (Eph 5), or a flock (Zech) for him to nurture and care for. In our relationship to our corporate mission and goals we are an army (Eph 6:10ff). In our relationship to God the Father we are a family (Eph 3:14-19). In our relationship to the Holy Spirit we are a temple for his dwelling place.

So, why are so few Christians unwilling to sacrifice for the success of the local church? One important answer is the culture of selfish individualism from which we have all come. Selfish individualism is a blight on our culture. It is a spiritual cancer that contaminates our relationship with the local church.
This morning I want to critique individualism in the church. To do this we are going to make two points. First we are going to look at biblical individualism. Second, we are going to examine selfish individualism. Last, we are going to close with some practical application. We will take a short break and then we will have some Q&A.

**A. BIBLICAL INDIVIDUALISM**

Biblical individualism is a virtue. Genesis 1:27 reads,

"God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

This text is foundational to Western Culture. From it we get good individualism, the idea that all human life is sacred. Gen. 1:27 tells us that every individual is important. It tells us that every individual is loved by God. Every individual is valuable. Every individual will also give an accounting to God.

Because of this text Western Culture protects the rights of the individual. The U.S. constitution and bill of rights exist, amongst other things, to protect the rights of the individual. In addition, biblical individualism stresses our individual accountability. I, not the group, will give an accounting to God on the day of Judgment. I will be judged for my actions, not those of my friends and neighbors. The hallowed character of the individual is unique to Western Culture and is the legacy of the Bible.

However, this individualism, the individualism championed by the Bible, is "unselfish" individualism. Whether family, church, or state, biblical individualism lives and sacrifices itself for the success of the larger social unit. The best example of unselfish individualism in today's culture occurs in sports. We admire the athlete who subordinates his reputation and success to the good of the team. If it is best for the team that the star player move from quarterback to offensive line, then the quarterback changes positions. After all, it is not about him. It is about the goals and success of the team.

This is the individualism championed by the Bible. The individual matters greatly to God. However, the biblical individual uses his rights and freedoms for the good of the social unit to which he belongs. His individualism is *unselfish*. It puts the welfare of the group ahead of itself. It is ambitious for the success of the group—family, church, or society. Trent Dilfer is a great example.

Seattle P.I. Dec 17, 2003, “Dilfer Remains a Class Act.” Trent Dilfer, backup quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks, is a ten year veteran of the NFL. In fact, he is so good that he
quarterbacked a previous team to a Superbowl Championship, and led his team to victories in 22 of the last 27 games he has started. He lost his starting job with the Seahawks due to an injury, and now he is just a backup quarterback. In addition, he has lost hundreds of thousands in incentives with the Seahawks because he is not playing.

Dilfer sloughs off the lost money. "I got paid more than most people in my first three years and I didn't do squat," he said. What is remarkable is not that he hasn't created waves, but how far he is on the other end of the spectrum. He is one of the great teammates the game has seen. "I am a member of a team; it takes everyone to make a team. You have to recognize that you still have a role. You have to stay focused and find out where your value is," Dilfer said.

The teammate who Dilfer has the most impact on is Matt Hasselbeck. "Trent is the best guy in the league to have by my side," Hasselbeck said. "He has been through the highs and the lows. He doesn't have to do the stuff that he does. His priorities are in line. He is a true teammate. He has a great moral fiber, a man of pure integrity. He is legit. He is the most inspiring person I know."

Coach Holmgren agrees. "He is an amazing man. He has been as good as he possibly could be in his role. This guy is a Super Bowl champ who is running our scout team enthusiastically. He helps me and helps Matt." The esteem with which Holmgren holds Dilfer is extraordinary. Twice this year as Holmgren has taken the stage in front of his team on Saturday night for the biggest speech of the week, he has called Dilfer to address the team. A head coach bypassing the opportunity to talk to his players and trusting it to one of his players, there is no greater compliment. "I have never seen a guy who is a backup and is one of the leaders of the team," center Robbie Tobeck said. "I have never seen someone who decided to be as selfless and take his role on the team." ...

How has he been able to take all of these circumstances and maintain his revered position on the team? "It may not be the answer you are looking for, but it's my faith," Dilfer said. "My faith more than anything else, it tells me to be other-centered rather than self-centered, not to focus on my circumstances and not to worry about where I sit. It is to remove my selfish desires..." Yesterday, Dilfer was rewarded by his teammates. By unanimous vote, they presented him the prestigious Ed Block Courage Award, which exemplifies commitment to the principles of sportsmanship and courage...

Dilfer models Biblical individualism. This individualism does not insist on its rights. It has no rights. It insists on its responsibilities. Although he does not insist on his own rights, he is willing to suffer for the rights of others. It is ambitious for the success of the group even at personal expense.

**B. SELFISH INDIVIDUALISM**

About our current culture Dave Harvey writes--

“Our sense of community has been largely lost, or maybe overwhelmed by the power of self. We’re a culture committed to self-fulfillment, self-expression, self-esteem, self-preservation—self, self, self. ‘To a great majority of Americans,’ says David Wells, ‘self has become the source of all values. The pursuit of self is what life is all about.’ The church
didn’t escape the tornado of individualism that swept through our world. The winds of “I, me, and mine’ pummeled evangelicalism, leaving a landscape of private, personal, customized faith.”¹

Although all cultures are selfish, selfish individualism is especially prominent in our culture. Where did it come from? Its roots are in the 18th century Enlightenment, not the Bible, specifically men like Rousseau (1712-78) Voltaire, Locke, and Montesquieu. Even though dead over 200 years, these men rule the worldview of the West from their graves. Their individualism was selfish to the core. It subordinated the success of the group to the selfish claims of the solitary, lone individual. The needs, wants, and desires of the individual became the measure of everything, in fact ultimately, the only thing that matters. Rousseau is an example of the groups attitude. He was astonishingly proud. About himself he wrote.

“The person who can love me as I can love is still to be born. No one ever had more talent for loving. I was born to be the best friend that ever existed. I would leave this life with apprehension if I knew a better person than me… Posterity will honor me because it is my due. I rejoice in myself. My consolation lies in my self esteem.”²

Despite this selfish pride the French elites loved Rousseau. He became a cult figure, an egomaniac celebrated for his selfishness. It all terminated in the blood bath known as the French Revolution.

Increasingly, the worldview of men like Rousseau has become the worldview of the 21st century. Rousseau’s attitudes sum up the trajectory of modern thought, and this trajectory is the enemy of all that God wants to accomplish in and through his people. In Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah gives us an example. He quotes a young nurse named Sheila, an ideological descendant of Rousseau.

“I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice…It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think he [god] would want us to take care of each other.”³

Sheila speaks for much of the modern world. She has no external authority but herself. She invents her religion and her god. And, like Rousseau,

¹ Dave Harvey, Rescuing Ambition, (Crossway: Wheaton, 2010), pg 159
² Ibid, Paul Johnson, pg 10
³ Quoted by Wells, David, Above All Earthly Power, pg 150 (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005)
her private religion is thoroughly saturated in self. Her religion is private. It has no place for corporate commitments. It sees no value in self-sacrifice or submission to external authority. The affect of this approach on the church has been catastrophic.

Hellerman: “Nearly all churches in America are characterized by an unwillingness of members to commit themselves deeply to their respective church…We are a radically individualistic society, oriented toward personal fulfillment in ways profoundly more ‘me-centered’ than any other culture or people-group in world history. It is our individualism—our insistence that the rights and satisfaction of the individual must take priority over any group to which one belongs—that has seriously compromised our ability to stay in relationship and grow with one another as God intends.”

Our advertisers get paid big bucks to discover America’s hot button and push it. Our cultural hot-button is this selfish individualism. Some advertisers unabashedly appeal to our infatuation with self.

* Botox Cosmetics "I did it for me"
* McDonalds "You deserve a break today"
* Burger King: "Have it your way"
* Dove Self Esteem Fund, "Every girl deserves to feel good about herself"

A second group of advertisers appeal to our rebellion, our hatred of rules, of external, institutional authority.

* SmartWater "Play first! You can make up the Rules later."
* Burger King "Sometimes you gotta break the rules"
* Neiman Marcus, "There are no rules here"
* Outback Steak House "No rules just right"
* Talbots, "If you obey all the rules, you miss all the fun.”-

A third group of advertisers appeal to our lust to live sensually, to surrender to our animal urges.

* Nike "Just do it"
* Chrysler "Take Life by the Horns"
* Sprite: "Obey Your Thirst"

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This "selfish individualism" is the mental baggage of the Franks, Suzettes, and Tims that join our churches. It has probably affected you. It has affected all of us. We usually become Christians utterly blind to this cultural baggage. We assume that our culture is normal, that it is similar to biblical culture, but it is not. Our emphasis on individualism, let alone selfish individualism, is unique both in the modern world and throughout world history.

Stark: “The Christian stress on individualism is ‘and eccentricity among cultures.’”

The New Testament world was radically different from the world in which we live. It was what Sociologists call a "strong-group" culture. It was fundamentally collective. Out of it grew the unselfish individualism celebrated in the pages of the New Testament.

Malina, Bruce: When we read the Bible today, and want to understand the New Testament, we must always remember that the people of the Bible were essentially group people and not individualists.5

In summary, God is glorified by individual Christians, but his greatest glory he has reserved for a people.

If we are really committed to advancing the glory of God, then we must love individuals. But our love must go beyond individuals to institutions, primarily the local church. In other words, God wants us to first be church-people. The success and prosperity of the church should, and must, capture our hearts sufficiently to cause us to make sacrifices for the church.

We should be like Trent Dilfer. The success of the team, the church, should concern us more than our personal success. The happiness of God’s people should concern us more than our personal happiness.

This attitude brings the sticks together and makes the fire blaze. Selfish individualism scatters the sticks and ultimately puts the fire out.

5Malina, B., & Joubert, S. 1997, c1996. A time travel to the world of Jesus. Orion: Halfway House. Also see Hellerman: “Jesus’ early followers were convinced that the group comes first—that I as an individual will become all God wants me to be only when I begin to view my goals, desires, and relational needs as secondary to what God is doing through his people, the local church. The group, not the individual, took priority in a believer’s life in the early church.”5
C. **APPLICATION: REJECT THE SELFISH INDIVIDUALISM OF OUR CULTURE**

I started by saying I had two goals. First, to motivate you to become a member of a local church. Second, to motivate you to go beyond membership by sacrificing for the goal and mission of the local church.

The Bible cuts right across selfish individualism. Where do we see it? We see unselfish individualism first and foremost in the Son of God. Remember, Jesus was a member of the original and primal Community, the Community that is the template and model for all human communities, the Community God has created human to model and glorify. That Community is the Trinity.

The Members of this Community all subordinate their personal desires, plans, ambitions, and goals to those of the greater community of which they are a part. The Father commanded the Son to go. At infinite expense to himself the Son went. He could have said something like this. “Father, I have other plans. I would really rather sleep in. Besides this is going to be painful.”

Or, he might have argued, “Why should I do this? You are going to get all the glory. This wasn’t my idea in the first place. It was yours.”

If God’s Son had been like you and me he might have said something like this. “Well I joined the Trinity. I became a member, but that doesn’t mean I have to push myself this hard. Besides no one will notice if I hold back.” Or Jesus might have thought something like this, “I’m not going to give too much of myself. I’m not going to get too committed. I’m not going to burn my bridges. I want to have a way out if things become too uncomfortable.”

This is the way we would respond, but it is not the way of Christ. Instead, Psalm 40:8 records his response. “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” Trent Dilfer served the team and sacrificed for the team because he wanted to be like Christ. Jesus was the ultimate team player. He made the success of the group more important than his own comfort.

Jesus invites us, he commands us, to be like him. Here are a few of the ways he exhorts us to join him in this way of life.

Matthew 16:24–25 — Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”
Self-denial means pushing yourself when you would rather pamper yourself. Self-denial means saying “no” to your rights, your independence, your freedoms, etc.

Luke 14:25–27 — Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 26 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

John 12:24–25 — 24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

What would sacrificing for the local church look like?

Financial Giving (People in our church that give 10% and make less than $35,000/year).

Exercising your talents for the good of the church. (Sarah Fullen, Lisa Ulrich, Ben Green)

Attending Church and HomeGroup. (Dave Nelson’s Comment, Cecilia Fry).

Praying earnestly for the mission of GCF. We exist to Glorify God by forming Christ in a growing church. (Jesse and Beth Anne Roseberry; Steve Lady; Lynn Theissen; Nancy Fullen; JenO Huseland; etc).

Another way we can practice unselfish individualism is by attending Important church functions: (Sexual Purity Seminar, Church Work Days, Pic-Nics, Summer Camp, Family Meetings). Why? The Elders call these meetings and events because we think they are important to our mission.

This has been an appeal to fuel the flame of God’s glory in this local church. To do that we must increasingly die to selfish individualism.