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GRACE COMMITMENTS

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The Local Church, Part 1: A Needed Authority for Kingdom People

ASSIGNMENTS

- Check JG member's progress on *21 Days of Worship*. If struggling, encourage them to start over with goal of getting 21 days straight before the holiday break.
- **TRUTH** – Your JG should read the online PDF resource, “*Why Church Membership?*”
- **EQUIPPING** – During this series your JG will memorize the books of the New Testament. A memory aid called “Learning the Books of the New Testament” is included at the end of this week's material. The goal is to have each member of your JG recite the books of the New Testament from memory by the fourth and final week of this series. During your first meeting, you should begin recruiting volunteers to recite them during your 2nd, 3rd, and 4th meetings.
- **MISSION** – Create a prayer list of people or groups to whom your JG members would like to make the gospel known through word and deed.

EXERCISES

- Review memory verse of the week and discuss how it relates to the **Truth** section.
- 1st year member models a 20-minute time of personal worship using **PRAISE**. This is the last week that the Leader's Guide will suggest modeling personal worship. However, anytime you feel it is needed, feel free to use this as a teaching tool to encourage your JG to develop this crucial spiritual discipline.
- Review the “Learning the Books of the New Testament” illustration and the “foundation” (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts).

DISCUSSIONS

- **TRUTH** – The material this week introduced your JG to the notion that the local church is a visible manifestation of God's invisible kingdom. As such, God has entrusted the “keys” of the kingdom to the spiritual leadership of the church. This means that the spiritual leaders of local churches are entrusted with authority to open and close the door of the

kingdom to those who would claim entry. This may well be a controversial concept for some in your JG. Many Christians today hold the view that individuals hold sole authority to declare whether they are Christians or not. However, Jesus' teaching on the keys shows that the church actually holds this authority. So the question is not just, "Do I say I am a Christian?" We must also ask, "Does my church say I am a Christian?" The way a local church says, "Yes", is by entering into a covenant relationship with an individual, receiving him or her as a member of the local covenant community. When discussing this material at your group meeting, you should focus on these points:

- The kingdom that Jesus brought is the reign of God over His people. God's kingdom (in this age) is not measured by its geographic extent, but by its expanding influence in the hearts of ever increasing numbers of people from every ethnic group around the world.
 - The coming of this kingdom is good news because outside the rule of the just and merciful King, there could be no salvation. Therefore, the gospel Jesus preached is the gospel of the coming kingdom of God.
 - The local church is the visible community through which people enter the invisible kingdom. It has been given custodial authority over the kingdom. It declares who is, and who is not, a member of the kingdom by embracing people as members of the church, or by withholding membership.
 - Church membership is an important step in one's personal spiritual journey that should not be neglected. Submission to local church leadership is a sign of one's submission to God's Kingdom reign.
- **TRUTH** – You can discuss any of the **IN BIBLE** questions with your group in order to clarify these points. Don't feel that you must discuss them all. Here are some tips that may help you:
 - **MATTHEW 13:31-33** – The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven teach similar truths about God's kingdom. Both parables describe the kingdom as beginning in a small, even hidden way, but growing over time. The parable of the mustard see particularly teaches that God kingdom grows of its own power and meets the spiritual needs of those who find shelter and rest in it. The parable of the leaven teaches that God's kingdom grows in influence by infiltrating its surroundings. It does this by winning the hearts of people from every language, ethnic group, national descent and philosophical or political persuasion.
 - **MATTHEW 16:13-19** – This passage teaches that custodial authority over the kingdom is given by Jesus to His church, as represented by His disciples. In spiritual matters, He would recognize their authority to open and close the doors of the kingdom to those who would claim entry. You may want to point out that by giving the keys (a symbol of authority) to all His disciples, Jesus is demonstrating that single authority over the church belongs only to Him. No other human being can faithfully bear the responsibility and safely exercise authority over the church alone. Therefore, no one Pope, Bishop, Pastor or Elder should be viewed as holding the keys alone.

- **MATTHEW 18:15-18** – You may want to note that Jesus is teaching how the church should wield its authority in the exercise of discipline of its members. The important point to make here is that authority is wielded with a redemptive focus. This teaching assumes that the offended person has truly been harmed or wronged in some way, but even so, excluding a member from the church is a last resort. To use modern legal terms, the “plaintiff” should first approach the “defendant” who has wronged him or her in an effort to bring reconciliation privately. If the defendant stubbornly refuses to make the situation right, then the plaintiff should bring one or two witnesses (people who are familiar with the facts of the situation). If the defendant still refuses to repent and recompense the plaintiff, then the church elders should be involved. If the defendant is still unrepentant, then s/he should be excluded from the church and sacraments. This amounts to treating that person as a non-Christian, since his or her lack of repentance is a strong evidence of being an unbeliever. (Though, only God knows if this person is truly a Christian.) Verse 18 shows that their judgment will bear heaven’s endorsement because they act as those possessing the keys of the kingdom.
- **ACTS 14:19-23** – Paul was eager to appoint elders in churches who would bear the keys in each local congregation. Without this delegated authority these churches would be adrift spiritually. Their effectiveness as a spiritual home for God’s people and mission to their communities would be seriously limited.
- **HEBREWS 13:17** – This verse teaches that church leaders serve under Christ’s authority to whom they must give account for the benefit of the church. In order for church members to benefit from their leaders’ service they must submit to it.
- **EQUIPPING** – Allow adequate time for a good discussion of these questions. Your goal is to help your JG members face any resistance they may have to the idea of submitting to church authority and to see that this is in conflict with a willingness to submit to God’s kingdom.
- **MISSION** – Discuss prayer lists. Ask a few people to share why certain people are on their list.