

~~I could~~  
~~I might~~  
~~I can~~  
~~I should~~  
**I WILL!**

NINE TRAITS OF THE  
OUTWARDLY FOCUSED CHRISTIAN

THOM S. RAINER

~~I could~~

~~I might~~

~~I can~~

~~I should~~

I WILL!

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## Chapter 1

# I Will Move from “I Am” to “I Will”

**I**t was one of the best days of my life.

I was a very young man of twenty-one years. And I was deeply in love.

The day was May 6, 1977. I asked my girlfriend, Nellie Jo, to marry me. I asked her to be my wife. And she gave me an incredible gift of grace.

She said “yes.”

We would get married on December 17, 1977. And after nearly four decades, I still look back on that day in May in amazement. At times, I am dumbfounded by her response.

She said “yes.”

You see, I can really be a jerk at times. I can let my temper get the best of me. I can be so busy doing good things that I neglect the best things. Like my family. Like my wife.

But, through it all, Nellie Jo has stood by me. She has loved me. She has forgiven me.

One time, in fear and trembling, I asked her. I asked her why she has remained so faithful and loving when I have been a lousy husband at times. Her response was incredibly simple, but incredibly revealing.

“Thomas,” she began. She’s the only person who calls me “Thomas.” I like it. She continued, “When I said, ‘I do’ and ‘for better or worse,’ I meant it. I knew we would not always have easy times. I knew there would be struggles. But I made a commitment to you. I made my mind up. That has been my attitude from the first day of our marriage.”

Stop for just a moment. Did you catch that last sentence?

“That has been my attitude from the first day of our marriage.”

Nellie Jo made a decision. She made a decision about her attitude.

## Our Attitude about Our Church

This book is about what we should *do* in our church. But before we go further talking about *doing*, we must address the issue of our attitude.

If we do without the right attitude, we submit to legalistic guidelines. We become frustrated. We burn out.

But if we have the right attitude, doing becomes natural. It becomes joyous. In other words, if you have a right, biblically directed attitude, you will experience joy in church membership.

The right attitude means we recognize that no church is perfect. We expect that some church members will be irritants

to us. We acknowledge that no pastor or church staff member is perfect.

But we serve and do anyway. We serve and do, not out of a sense of legalistic obligation, but out of an overflow of gratitude of what God has done for us through His Son.

So what exactly does the right attitude look like? Let's look at four biblical examples.

### **The Right Attitude: *I Am a Unifying Church Member***

The health of any group is tied to its unity. It's true for sports teams. It's true for businesses. It's true for families. And it's true for churches.

But here is the thing about unity. It only works when individuals have made a decision. Each individual in the group must decide to put the good of the group before his or her own needs. It only works for individuals who have the right attitude.

Paul emphasized unity very clearly as he wrote to different churches. Read what he said to the church at Ephesus: "Therefore I, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love, diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us" (Eph. 4:1–3).

Let's be clear. The Bible mandates us to have an attitude of unity in the church. But look at what it requires: humility, gentleness, patience, and acceptance of one another in love. Have you ever been to a church business meeting where some

of those requirements were not met? Have you ever been to a church business meeting where none of those requirements were met? Have you ever been to a church business meeting where true humility is displayed?

Unity requires humility. That means we view others as better than ourselves.

Unity requires gentleness. That means we control our temper and demonstrate kindness to other church members, whether they are good guys or jerks.

Unity requires patience. That means we put up with a lot even if we are frustrated and perplexed at the behavior and attitude of others.

Unity requires acceptance of one another in love. That means we accept people unconditionally. It doesn't mean we condone sinful behavior. But it does mean we demonstrate a lot of grace.

Okay, I admit it. I just read my own words. I looked at the requirements of unity, and I thought, *No way!* There is no way I can be humble, gentle, patient, and loving to some of the people I know.

And then I remember.

I remember how much Christ loves me. I remember how He died for me. I remember how I deserve none of it.

It was grace. Totally unmerited favor. In His strength, I can have an attitude of unity. Indeed, I must have an attitude of unity.

## The Right Attitude: *I Am a Sacrificial Church Member*

If we have any doubt about this attitude, look at these words from Philippians 2:5–8:

Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage. Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross.

Read those words again slowly. We are to have the attitude of Christ, the sacrificial attitude that took Him to death on a cross.

I wish I had asked my dad a lot more questions before he died. I wish I had insisted he tell me more about his life.

I now want to hear more about how he sacrificed for his siblings when his mother died. He was only ten years old. His dad, an alcoholic, took to the bottle until his death.

I now want to hear more about how he sacrificed for his country. He was a top turret gunner on a B21 airplane in World War II. He was wounded and received the Purple Heart. He received other medals of valor.

I now want to hear more about how he sacrificed for his home, a small town in south Alabama. I want to hear about his

years as a mayor where he guided the town in the turbulent 60s and 70s when race tensions were at a peak.

But Dad died when I was twenty-eight years old. I never asked him enough questions. I never listened enough to him tell his stories of courage and sacrifice.

You see, when we sacrifice, we are acting most like Christ. We are learning that the greatest joy comes when we put others before ourselves.

By the way, Paul wrote these words to church members in Philippi. They were written in the very clear context regarding the attitude of church members. They were to have an attitude of sacrifice. It was a clear and powerful mandate for church members 2,000 years ago.

And it still is for us today.

### **The Right Attitude: *I Am a Prayerful Church Member***

Her name is Lillian. When I became the pastor of a church in St. Petersburg, Florida, I immediately noticed her attitude. It was obvious. She told me she would be praying for me and for my ministry every day. She meant it.

I have no doubt Lillian prayed for me. I have no doubt her prayers were a primary reason my ministry in St. Petersburg was so blessed.

The apostle Paul knew about the power of prayer in the church. These powerful words were written to the church at Colosse:

For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven't stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God. (Col. 1:9–10)

Paul had an attitude of prayerfulness. And he wanted all the members of the church to have that attitude.

Let me remind you of this prayerful attitude in the context of 1 Timothy 3:7: "Furthermore, he must have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he does not fall into disgrace and the Devil's trap." This sentence is one of the qualifications of a pastor. He must have a good reputation among the outsiders, or the unbelievers, who are not a part of the church. Then the verse refers to "the Devil's trap."

The word *trap* is a rare usage in the Bible. Traps are never set unintentionally. It is a strategic and powerful threat by Satan to take down pastors and church leaders. It is a real threat, a powerful threat.

So how do we respond? The Bible is very clear that we fight this spiritual reality with our spiritual strength: prayer. Immediately after Paul tells the church to put on the full armor of God to fight spiritual warfare, he closes with an admonition of prayer: "Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert in this with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18).

There are all kinds of attitudes you can have in your church. One of those is an attitude of prayer.

### **The Right Attitude: *I Am a Joyful Church Member***

Have you ever noticed that grateful people are joyous people? Paul gave the Philippian church a command to rejoice, and he tied the spirit of joy to an attitude of thanksgiving or gratitude:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:4–7)

Paul shoots straight with us. If we are to really have joy in our lives, we must be gentle and gracious. We are to pray instead of worry. And as we pray, we are to pray with a spirit of thanksgiving or gratitude.

Have you ever seen a GCM? That's my acronym for a "grumpy church member." They are the church members most likely to complain at church business meetings. They are the persistent critics of the pastor and staff. They are the members who view the church as an organization where they pay their dues to get their perks and their privileges. And they are grumpy and divisive when they don't.

Contrast them to a JCM (“joyous church member”). A joyous church member counts her blessings. She is grateful for the freedom and opportunity to worship with other believers. She is a constant source of encouragement to pastors, church staff, and fellow church members.

The JCM is always grateful. The GCM is regularly complaining and frustrated. The JCM looks for opportunities to encourage and give. The GCM nitpicks and finds fault in many things.

That is why one member is joyful and another is grumpy. It’s all a matter of attitude.

When we received the gift of salvation, we became a part of the body of Christ. Read how the Bible describes this gift: “Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. And God has placed these in the church” (1 Cor. 12:27–28).

Did you get that? When you received the free gift of salvation, you also received the gift of membership into the body of Christ.

Membership in the body of Christ, the church, is a gift from God.

And when we receive a gift, we should be joyous and grateful.

It really is a matter of our attitude.

## **Time to Move from “I Am” to “I Will”**

Your attitude determines who you are: I am joyous. I am angry. I am grateful. I am jealous.

You get the picture. Our attitudes are the foundations of our actions. If I am joyous, I will tend to be an encouraging person. If I am angry, I will tend to be a critical person.

Let me return to the opening story in this chapter. This time let me talk about my marriage to Nellie Jo from my own perspective.

Let's presume I have all the healthy attitudes in place. I love her unconditionally. I focus on her strengths more than her weaknesses. I am grateful for her, for the gift from God that she is to me.

And that's it.

I never serve her. I never ask her out for a date. I never offer her words of encouragement. I rarely spend time with her.

So what would Nellie Jo think of my good attitudes? She would rightly think they are contrived and insincere. She would doubt my commitment. She would wonder if I am truly committed to our marriage.

Maybe many of you church members do indeed have a good attitude. Maybe you are not in the group that whines, complains, nags, and pouts. Maybe your heart is really in the right place.

So here is my simple question. Is your attitude reflected in your actions? In case you are wondering where I am headed with this question, let me offer you an example.

Several years ago, we considered the most active church members who attended church around three times a week. They might attend a Sunday morning Bible study or a Sunday

morning worship service. Others might return for Sunday evening events or Wednesday activities.

Do you know how much that perspective has changed in just a few years? Today, many pundits define an active church member as someone who attends church events or services at least three times a month.

Did you get that? An active church member has now been re-defined from three times a week to three times a month!

I can anticipate potential objections, "Don't make this matter a legalistic obligation! We don't need an activity checklist to be close to God!"

I understand. But let me ask you this question. Would your spouse think you are still devoted to him or her if you decided to reduce your time with him or her by 75 percent? That's what is happening with even some of our most committed church members.

It's time. It's time for a decision. It's time for a church membership revolution. Not because we are legalistically obligated. Not because we equate activities to commitment. But because a great attitude toward your church, the bride of Christ, will result in great actions for her.

Will you join me in this revolution? Will you prayerfully consider giving your life's all in commitment to Christ through His church? Will you be a part of a movement that will change the world as the body of Christ unites in force with renewed effort and renewed zeal?

It's time. Christ is calling all church members to forsake self and to serve others for His sake. In doing so, our church

becomes our priority and our focus as it was in the New Testament.

Listen carefully to this call of God. Listen to how you can discern your commitment in His church. And when you begin to understand the action plans He has set before you, be prepared to respond with two simple words.

I will.

### *Points to Ponder*

1. Explain how Ephesians 4:1–3 works in the context of our relationship with fellow church members.
2. Why do you think church members are less committed to their churches today than they were several years ago?
3. Read again Philippians 2:5–8. How does this passage relate to our commitment in our church today?
4. Would you say your commitment to your church is more or less today than it was five years ago? Why?