



FOREWORD BY RAY ORTLUND

LOVE
YOUR
CHURCH

8 GREAT THINGS
ABOUT BEING A
CHURCH MEMBER

TONY
MERIDA

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1. BELONGING

A GOSPEL-CENTERED FAMILY

As image-bearers of God, people are made for community. The triune God is a relational God, and he has created us for relationships.

Perhaps this is why so many popular television shows have to do with community. In the 80s, *Cheers* featured a group of friends who met to socialize at a local bar. Many folks can finish the theme song: “Sometimes you wanna go ... where everybody knows your name.” *Friends*, a show revolving around six friends who live in Manhattan, was wildly popular in the 90s. (And this show has recently witnessed a resurgence of interest among millennials and Gen-Zers.) “I’ll be there for you / Cos you’re there for me too” was sung by many avid followers. In the 2000s, millions became attached to the characters of the sci-fi show *Lost*, which told the story of survivors of an airplane crash, living together on a mysterious island; it, too, magnified the importance of relationships.

The popularity of social media also illustrates our longing for community. People want to be known, want to know others, and need friends. Many people have described finding a powerful sense of community in local gyms, as well. It has become more than a place to exercise. This need for community is also why our kids always wonder, “Will I meet any new friends?” at the start of each new school year. (If only they were as excited about biology!)

God has given us a need for community—and he has given us the place where that need for community is met: the church. Sin breaks fellowship with God and with others, but we are reconciled to God and one another through the gospel. God, then, establishes this unity in Christ. But we do have to maintain it (Ephesians 4 v 2). He gives us a place where we belong; now we need to commit to belonging.

Experiencing the blessing of community requires you to avoid distancing yourself from other brothers and sisters in the church, and to avoid neglecting times together (in small groups, in corporate worship, and in ongoing communication). This is what made the COVID-19 experience so challenging, and it is why churches creatively tried to keep believers connected in community and worship, albeit in less than ideal ways.

THE CHURCH FROM JESUS’ PERSPECTIVE

When I began following Jesus in college, I was very involved in campus ministry and local outreach events,

but actually I thought I could do more apart from the local church. I thought the church would slow me down. I was into “movements” and “events,” not the church. I was aware of crazy drama in churches and wanted no part of it. I was interested in ministering to my age group (or slightly younger), not to a multigenerational group of folks. I was into the Christian subculture, not slow-plodding faithfulness in the context of the church.

Much of this was due to my shoddy understanding of the church prior to studying the Scriptures carefully. I had failed to see the church from Jesus’ perspective—to understand the way the Bible describes the church. And I believe that there are many in this same position today. We cannot allow experience or preference to rule us when considering the church; we must see the church biblically. And that means seeing the church joyfully.

Belonging to a church means investing your life in a gospel-centered community of believers who joyfully serve one another and advance Jesus’ mission together. Several decades ago, the great Welsh preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones underscored the need for a joyful church:

The greatest need of the hour is a revived and joyful church ... Unhappy Christians are a poor recommendation for the faith ... The exuberant joy of the early Christians was one of the most potent factors in the spread of Christianity.

(Spiritual Depression, p 5)

The gospel should naturally lead us to “exuberant joy,” as we consider what God has done for us in Christ. And it is in the context of the church that this joy is caught, experienced, and increased.

It’s this joy—a Christ-centered joy experienced even in suffering—that’s unique, powerful, uplifting, and attractive. This doesn’t mean the church will be devoid of sorrow; it means that even in sorrow there is a well of joy from which to drink: the wells of our salvation. In hard times, we can be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6 v 10).

It’s a privilege to belong to the new-covenant people of God: to be part of those who have been saved through repentance and faith in Christ Jesus, who possess the indwelling Holy Spirit, who are joined in a local gathering, who assemble to hear the word preached, who engage in corporate worship, who are led by qualified pastors/elders, and who enjoy the wonder of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It is an awesome thing to be part of those who commit to practicing the “one another”s of Scripture, and who scatter to fulfill the Great Commandment (love your neighbor) and the Great Commission (make disciples of all nations).

Both the universal church (all Christian believers in all times and places round the world) and the local church are important, and there’s often an overlap between the two, but this book focuses on the local church. As Professor Gregg Allison says, the local church is “by

far the most common referent in the New Testament's presentation of the church" (*Sojourners and Strangers*, p 61-62).

The word "church" (*ekklēsia*) generally means "gathering" or "assembly," but the church is more than a gathering. The church is a local community of believers who gather for worship and scatter for witness. They share life together centered on Jesus for the good of one another and for the good of the world. This idea of *community* is everywhere in the New Testament; the Bible knows nothing of "lone ranger" Christianity. I love how Titus says that Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself *a people for his own possession* who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2 v 14, my emphasis). Did you catch that? He gave himself not just for me individually (though that's true!) but for us collectively, to purify a people for himself.

The letter of 1 Peter also has a strong community focus, using several images to remind believers of their communal identity with truths like "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (1 Peter 2 v 10). The New Testament rejects the popular notion that "I'm a member of the universal church; I don't need to join a local, visible church." We show we are part of the universal church by identifying with a *real community of people locally*. It's like our union with Christ. We live out our spiritual union with Christ *visibly*, and we live out our union with other believers *visibly*.

While some people frown on the idea of church membership, it's important to recognize various biblical truths that speak about it. Here are some to consider: church discipline assumes that people in the church are identifiable (Matthew 18 v 15-17). When Paul says "expel the immoral brother," this instruction assumes that some people are in and some people are out (1 Corinthians 5 v 9-13). The New Testament also contains lists of members of a local church, which illustrates that people were identifiable (for example, 1 Timothy 5). In Acts we see regular counting of people (for instance Acts 2 v 41; 4:4), and in Hebrews 13 v 17 we find that overseers will give an account for the people they lead, which means they must know who they're accountable for. What's more, the metaphors for the church—stones in a temple, members of a family, citizens of a kingdom, and members of a body—all speak to this concept of membership and belonging.

There's certainly flexibility in how local churches seek to implement a healthy membership process, but the emphasis on belonging to a local fellowship is clear in the New Testament. Some churches have very clear membership structures in place (like my own local church); others have a less formalized approach. But whatever the case, every believer should make a real commitment to belong to a local church. Active belonging is the first privilege and responsibility of a church member (or, to put it another way, of every Christian), and the doorway to the others.

ELEVATING OUR CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH

Paul's letter to the Ephesians contains many significant passages about the church. They're mostly about the universal church, but many of these ideas apply to local churches also.

In Ephesians 1, Paul describes the church as the body of Christ, with Christ being the sovereign head of the church (Ephesians 1 v 21-23). In chapter 2, Paul reminds the believers (Jew and Gentile) of their prior alienation from God and his people, and of what Christ has done through the cross to reconcile them to God and to one another (2 v 11-18). Paul calls the church *fellow citizens, members of the household of God*, and *stones in God's temple*, with Jesus being the "cornerstone" (v 19-22).

In Ephesians 3, Paul prays for God to be glorified "in the church" (3 v 20-21). Then in 4 v 1-6, Paul discusses *the unity of the church*. He says the church is united by a divine calling (v 1), Christ-like conduct (v 2-3), and a common confession (v 4-6). He adds that God has given his people spiritual gifts for ministry and has given leaders to the church in order to equip the saints for service, that believers may grow into maturity (v 7-16).

In chapter 5 the inspired apostle says that Christ "loved the church [his bride] and gave himself for her" (5 v 25). The idea of "I love Jesus but not the church" is inconsistent and problematic. She's his bride; so that's like saying to my best friend, "I love you, and I am happy to hang out with you; but I have no time for your wife and would rather not

have to see her or spend time with her. Does that sound ok for you?” Paul adds that Christ is sanctifying, nourishing, and cherishing the church and that he will one day present his church in complete holiness (5 v 26-29)—as William Cowper’s hymn says, “Till all the ransomed church of God be saved to sin no more.”

But we must not pass over Ephesians 3 v 10. The apostle tells us that the church—made up of Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) believers—is making known “the multi-faceted wisdom of God” to “the rulers and authorities in the heavens” (CSB). These “rulers and authorities” are probably both bad and good heavenly beings, although the apostle’s particular concern in Ephesians is mainly with evil powers (see 6 v 12). The angels look on at God’s gracious act of salvation—seen visibly as saved people gather together to praise their Savior and love one another—and they marvel (1 Peter 1 v 10-12), while demonic forces look on in fear and tremble. The evil forces have already been defeated at the cross, and they await their final defeat. So then, there is more going on with the church than meets the eye. If you are part of the church, then you are part of a cosmic sermon that is being preached to spiritual rulers and authorities. Every time you gather, you are making known the “multi-faceted” wisdom of God. God’s grace and glory is displayed in a diverse people who have been called, redeemed, forgiven, made alive, and united in Christ.¹

1 Another striking passage about the glory of the church is found in Hebrews 12 v 18-24, where the author speaks of believers joining in praise with myriads of the heavenly

OBSTACLES TO COMMUNITY

So, what is the problem with belonging? All too often, it's us. As Christians, we need to overcome at least four obstacles to live out this vision of gospel-centered, Spirit-filled community in the church.

Sensationalism. Many Christians are stuck on the dramatic. We get excited about huge conferences, someone else's pastor, or the latest controversy. Thrill-seekers simply don't find life in a local church stimulating enough to really get involved and stay involved. Caring for the elderly in a local church? Restoring a wayward member? Helping the single mom? Serving in childcare? These things don't usually excite sensationalists. But while these acts may not be sensational in many people's eyes, they would turn the world upside down if we began to live them out. What's more, the endless search for something bigger, greater, and more extraordinary is in the end exhausting. We need a renewal of Christians who are wholly committed to living out basic Christianity with their faith family.

Mysticism. When it comes to life in the Spirit, many think of mystical, miraculous, or private experiences. This is nothing new: Simeon the Stylite, the first of the "Desert Fathers," constructed a short pillar in the Syrian desert sometime around AD 423 and lived there for six years out of his desire to live in communion with God. But is that what it means to be spiritual? Being a desert hermit,

host; and how believers alive in this world are united to believers in heaven, all sharing a heavenly citizenship.

away from people and worldly distractions, elevated off the ground? As Phil Ryken asks, “Is there childcare in the desert?” (*Galatians*, p 243)—not everyone can go live in the desert alone, and even if they could, that’s not the picture of discipleship in the context of community that we see in Scripture.

In contrast to the hermit’s approach, consider the opening chapters of the book of Revelation, where we see Jesus giving his evaluation of and instruction to seven churches, or “lampstands,” in modern-day Turkey. Jesus is described as “walk[ing] among the seven lampstands” (2 v 1; see also 1 v 13). Think about this: *Christ is walking among the church!* This is why I want my life intertwined with the church. This is why I refuse to give up on the church. Where is Jesus? He’s among his church. He’s up close and intimate with his church. He’s the Shepherd, the Head, the Vine, the Foundation, and the Husband. To be best placed to experience Jesus in a deep, fresh, life-changing way, you don’t need a perch in the desert; you need a pew in a church.

Idealism. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s classic book *Life Together*, he talks about the problem of having a “wish dream” when it comes to the church. Bonhoeffer explains how idealism is the enemy of true community: “He who loves his dream of community more than the community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial” (p 26).

Wish dreams destroy community. Some have wish dreams related to small-group expectations, pastoral expectations, or program expectations. Real life together will involve highs, and it will involve lows; it will involve frustration, disappointment, and struggle. But by grace, we press on together as sinners redeemed by Jesus. This doesn't mean we don't work hard to make improvements in every area in the church (we do!). It means we rethink our expectations.

I often chuckle when wish dreamers say, "I wish the church could just get back to the way it was in the first century; those people had it all together." I want to ask, "Have you read the New Testament? Have you read 1 Corinthians? How about the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5? It's hard to get much earlier than that!" Letter after letter in the New Testament addresses *problems* in the church! The seven letters to the churches in Revelation contain rebukes to five of the seven churches. Pattern our church after the New Testament? Yes. But let's not pretend that churches in the first century were flawless. Let's kill this wish dream and be quicker to identify evidences of grace in the church rather than function as a church critic. Let's celebrate when the church has biblical priorities and show grace when our church may not prefer our preferences.

Individualism. Many (often without realizing it) live isolated lives, especially in the West, never experiencing

the satisfying joy of biblical community. We know so many people, but we go deep with very few (if any). Technology won't give us what our hearts long for either. Technology may strengthen relationships, but it can't replace them. The COVID-19 pandemic taught us all this. After two weeks of video calls, I was sick of digital interaction. I thought about 2 John 12 during this dreadful experience: "Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead *I hope to come to you and talk face to face*, so that our joy may be complete" (my emphasis). John says there are limits to pen and ink (or, for us, the computer/texting/video). Emails, texts, and calls are poor substitutes for *embodied relationships*. Something is clearly lacking without face-to-face interaction. A lack of real embodied relationships will lead to a loss of joy.

It's a privilege to be in community with brothers and sisters. This has nothing to do with whether you are outgoing or shy, introverted or extroverted. It's at the heart of being a Christian. Bonhoeffer put it like this:

It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing ... The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer ... The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship

of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God ... It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren. (Life Together, p 18-19)

We need each other. This doesn't mean we need to live together in a Christian commune. It doesn't mean community is easy, or that it does not sometimes feel hard. It will never be perfect in this world, but it can still be experienced in a way that is wonderful.

This doesn't mean that all of our friends should be Christians (that can't be the case if we want to be Christ's witnesses). It simply means that we fix our minds on a vision of the Spirit-filled Christian life that essentially involves being in community, and we must be committed to pursuing that.

ACTION STEPS

Based on the New Testament's perspective of the church, allow me to offer you some next steps.

- *Elevate your concept of the church.* Don't treat the church as unimportant, unnecessary, or a hindrance to doing great things for God. The church is imperfect but indispensable to faithful Christian discipleship.
- *Identify yourself with a people in a local church.* If you're a professing Christian, but not part of a local church, then realize that you're not following

the New Testament pattern. Realize also that you're not helping yourself, for it is not wise or safe to be apart from accountability, discipline, and the oversight of pastoral leaders who will give an account to God (Hebrews 13 v 17).

- *If you're considering relocating, make joining a local church a priority.* Whether you are moving for work or school (or for some other reason), factor in the local church in your decision-making process. Be eager to unite with a gospel-centered, Bible-believing community.
- *Never forget that it's a privilege to belong to a local family of faith, and to be part of the larger universal church!* Locally, it's a gift to extend Christ's welcome to one another, to gather corporately for worship, to share life together, to give our time, talent, and treasure to further the gospel, and to live on mission together. Globally, it's a gift to stand together with our brothers and sisters around the globe, who confess Jesus as Lord. Eternally, it's a gift to know that we will be joined with all the redeemed from all time singing "Worthy is the Lamb."
- *Pray for your church regularly.* Don't underestimate the importance of praying for the people of God, for its leaders, and for the advancement of the mission.