

WHY WE LOVE THE LOCAL CHURCH

I. WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOD DOING?

The primary reason we love the local church is because we believe God loves the local church and has ordained it as the primary means of fulfilling His purpose in the world today. Therefore, our understanding of the local church, or anything for that matter, must always start with God and not with man. So, what is God up to?

The simple answer, which could take a lifetime to explore the depths of, is that He is gathering a people for His glory. This purpose can be summed up in the frequent refrain in scripture – “I will be their God and they will be my people.”

A. The People

In the beginning God created Adam and Eve in His image so that they might relate with Him and rule His creation for His glory. Quickly, sin ruined all of this but God didn’t abandon His purpose, kill Adam and Eve and start all over. Rather He set out to redeem.

Abraham - *Genesis 17:7* And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

Israel at the Exodus - *Exodus 6:7* I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Israel after the Exile - *Zechariah 8:8* I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.”

The NT Church (The New Covenant) - *Hebrews 8:10* For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

The Consummation - *Revelation 21:2-3* And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

B. The Purpose

The foremost purpose of all of this is that God would receive glory. Not that He would be made more glorious than He already is, that is impossible, but that His people should live, speak and think in such a way that He is represented as He truly is.

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Ephesians 3:20-21 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

JOHN PIPER – “God’s deepest purpose for the world is to fill it with reverberations of His glory in the lives of a new humanity, ransomed from every people, tribe, tongue and nation.”

C. The Plan

The church is God’s chosen means for carrying out His purpose to receive glory through a people gathered to Himself until Jesus returns. He has ordained no other organization or structure for this purpose.

Matthew 16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 28:18-20 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The commission is to make disciples. This involves three things: to proclaim the gospel to all nations; to see all who believe added to the church (the Bible is not the story of individual salvation but of corporate identity – we are saved to join); and, to ensure that all who believe mature as disciples.

TIM CHESTER and STEVE TIMMIS (Total Church, 63) – “Most gospel ministry involves ordinary people doing ordinary things with gospel intentionality.”

DAVE HARVEY – “The great commission is not merely communicating God’s word but creating community where the word can be heard and done.”

KOSTENBERGER AND O'BRIEN (To the Ends of the Earth, 184) – “Proclaiming the gospel meant for Paul not simply an initial preaching or with it the reaping of converts; it included also a whole range of nurturing and strengthening activities which led to the firm establishment of congregations. ...To conclude, then: the activities in which Paul engaged as he sought to fulfill his missionary commission included not only primary evangelism, through which men and women were converted, but also the founding of churches and bringing of believers to full maturity in Christ.”

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Does it really matter if I actually join a local church? Aren't I already a member of the universal church? Isn't my personal relationship with Jesus all that really matters? Such questions are common, and not altogether surprising given our individualistic culture and natural tendency toward independence. However, such questions also reveal a misunderstanding about the church and God's purposes in and through the church.

The Scriptures make it clear that God's specific purposes for His people are accomplished as individuals join themselves to and participate in local churches. Thus, all Christians, while members of the universal church, have the privilege and responsibility to be a vital member of a specific local church.

G.W. KIRBY – “ It is necessary to stress that the New Testament never countenances the possibility of a believer living his Christian life apart from the context of the local church.”

BILL SCHEIDLER – “The local church is God's vehicle through which He would strengthen and equip His people. To reject the local church is to resist God's plan and elevate ourselves above God. We need the Lord, but we also need each other if we are going to become all that God desires for us.”

A. Church Membership is Clearly Implied in Scripture

Where does the Bible specifically say I have to join a local church? It doesn't. But...

1. It was the clear practice of the early church and the assumed condition of the Christians in the NT. Converts were “added to” and “joined” a specific, discernable group of fellow believers. Letters are written to a specific group of people gathered in specific places.

Acts 2:47 And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

1 Corinthians 1:2 To the church of God that is in Corinth

2. It is the clear implication of the biblical metaphors describing the church

The primary NT metaphors for the church – body (**1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 1:22-23**); temple (**Ephesians 2:21, 1 Peter 2:4-5**); household (**1 Timothy 3:15**); and, flock (**Acts 20:28**) – have as a key characteristic the idea of separate individuals joined together into a single entity for the purpose of relationship, growth and mission.

3. It is the necessary condition for pastoral care.

While Jesus is the chief shepherd of His people He has, throughout history, chosen to exercise His leadership through delegated authorities.

Ephesians 4:8-13 Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”...And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

These men are called to lead, feed, watch over and care for an identifiable group of people and will have to give an account for those committed to their care. Likewise, believers are commanded to obey and submit to specific leaders.

Acts 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

4. It is the necessary context for the sacraments

Sacraments are an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace which is ours through the gospel. Those sacraments are baptism and the Lord's Supper. In addition to celebrating our individual salvation, the sacraments serve as membership controls in the church. To be baptized is to identify oneself not only with Jesus but with the people of God. To receive the Lord's Supper is to testify not only to our communion with Jesus but also our communion with one

another. It is in this sense that sacraments are rightly called ordinances of the church.

Matthew 28:18-20 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

1 Corinthians 10:17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

No local church can rightly administer the sacraments unless they know the spiritual condition of those who are participating. And no local church can know the spiritual condition of those participating unless there is some kind of committed relationship with one another.

5. It is the necessary context for church discipline

Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5 both describe situations in which believers are to confront other believers who are persisting in a sinful way of life. This can only refer to a situation in which Christians are joined together in an identifiable membership that is committed to live a godly lifestyle distinct from the world.

Matthew 18:15-17 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

These steps can only be taken if there is an identifiable church that can be told of the brothers sin and from which the brother can be removed or excommunicated.

6. It is the primary place where gospel ministry is supported

Believers are commanded to financially support the local church where they receive care and training.

1 Timothy 5:17-18 “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.””

1 Corinthians 9:13-14 “Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”

B. Church Membership is Vital to our Spiritual Health and Growth

Every Christian is called to an ever maturing discipleship in Jesus. Part of that calling is to put to death sin and to put on Christian virtue (**Ephesians 4:20-24, Colossians 3:4-14**). Scripture is clear that this process is not to be undertaken alone but rather in the context of a caring community of believers.

Ephesians 4:15-16 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Hebrews 3:12-13 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

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.

Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

DONALD GUTHRIE (Hebrews, 216) – “The New Testament lends no support to the idea of lone Christians. Close and regular fellowship with other believers is not just a nice idea, but an absolute necessity for the encouragement of Christian values.”

JIM DURKIN - "Neither individual Christians nor the church corporately can come to full maturity without enduring committed relationships among Christians and the atmosphere of care, support and encouragement that these relationships produce."

C. Church Membership Enables Us To Effectively Use Our Spiritual Gifts

Scripture is clear that every Christian has gifts that are to be used to contribute to the mission of the church. Apart from membership it is difficult to practice your gifts with regularity. Membership also provides the protection and care that pastors provide in helping people to identify and effectively use their gifts.

WAYNE GRUDEM (Systematic Theology, 1016) – “A spiritual gift is any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.”

1 Corinthians 12:7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Corinthians 14:26 What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

1 Peter 4:10-11 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

D. Church Membership Enables Us to Hear the Word Preached and Applied in a Systematic Way

Preaching and teaching are the primary way pastors equip the saints. They also serve to protect us from doctrinal error that the NT so consistently warns us against.

2 Timothy 4:3-4 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

2 Timothy 3:16-4:2 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Ephesians 4:11-14 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

JOHN CALVIN (BST, 165) – “They therefore are insane who, neglecting this means of building up the church...content themselves with private reading of the scripture and imagine they do not need the ministry of the church.”

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMITMENT

ELTON TRUEBLOOD (quoted by Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor*, 19) – “Perhaps the greatest single weakness of the contemporary Christian church is that millions of supposed members are not really involved at all, and what is worse, do not think it strange that they are not.”

Commitment means a pledge or promise to do something, in this case to faithfully walk out your relationship with God and His people in a local church until God would direct otherwise. Such a commitment is the biblical norm where believers didn't just attend a church but were "added to" and "continually devoted to" it.

Commitment establishes trust which enables us to open our hearts to someone, to begin to relate openly and to plan for the future together. It lets others know they can count on you in both good times and bad. Commitment is often the key element in determining whether a person will grow strong or struggle in their walk with God.

JERRY WHITE - "As I observed those whose lives clearly reflected deep spiritual growth and those who seemed to stagnate, I searched for the issue that represented the fork in the road that led to their present state. I believe the foundational issue is specific commitment. . . . Ordinary people who make simple, spiritual commitments under the lordship of Jesus Christ make an extraordinary impact on their world. Education, gifts, and abilities do not make the difference. Commitment does."

C.J. MAHANEY – “To God, our commitment to his people and his Church is an essential outgrowth of our commitment to Jesus. It is a directive not, as some would have it, an optional elective.”

Only two things are required for membership at Crossway: that one be a Christian and that he or she regularly attends the Sunday morning corporate gathering. While not required it is expected that every member participate in a community group, serve, give and witness to the gospel.

CHARLES SPURGEON - “I know there are some who say, “Well, I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to any church.” Now, why not? “Because I can be a Christian without it.” Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord’s commands as by being obedient? There is a brick. What is it made for? To help build a house. It is of no use for that brick to tell you that it is just as good a brick while it is kicking about on the ground as it would be in the house. It is a good-for-nothing brick. So you rolling-stone Christians, I do not believe that you are answering your purpose. You are living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do.”

A Few Closing Thoughts

KEVIN DEYOUNG AND TED KLUCK (Why We Love The Church, 221-222, 226) – “It’s easy to blast the church for all its failures. It’s harder to live in it day after day, year after year, with all its ho-hum humdrum and slowly, consistently make a difference...What we need are fewer revolutionaries and a few more plodding visionaries. That’s my dream for the church – God’s redeemed people holding tenaciously to a vision of Godly obedience and God’s glory, and pursuing that godliness and glory with relentless, often unnoticed, plodding consistency...I still believe the church is the hope of the world – not because she gets it all right, but because she is a body with Christ for her head.”

CHARLES SPURGEON – “If I had never joined a church till I had found one that was perfect, I should never have joined one at all. And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth.”

BRYAN CHAPPELL (Ephesians, 74) – “Despite all of her weakness, there is no more powerful an organization of hope in the world than a body of believers loving one another, helping and forgiving one another, praying for the work of Christ in their midst, supporting each other in joy and in sorrow, equipping disciples, showing mercy to outsiders, and praising the God who enables it all. The cumulative effect of multiple churches so living is the world’s greatest power for good.”