

Class Introduction

Unity in Action

Scripture has much to say on the need for local church unity. Jesus specifically prayed for it the night before His death, John 17.20-23. Peter instructed the church about it, 1 Peter 1.22-23. And of course, Paul has much to say on the matter in his teaching scattered throughout his epistles, Ephesians 4.1-3 and Philippians 2.3-4 being some of the most notable.

Many of us clearly understand that we have been called to maintain the unity given to us. The more difficult matter is to actually work inside it and act in such a way that keeps it going and contributes positively to encouraging others in it. What we will be studying this series of lessons is not so much aimed at *what* unity is, but *how* it looks in the day-to-day life of the local church.

We live in a time where the world is greatly diminishing the importance of the church. Compared to our grandparent's era or those before, the pendulum has swung completely to the other side: church attendance and membership seems to be headed for an all-time low. The world sees the church as being outdated, boring, irrelevant, and filled with hypocrites. The following things may sound familiar:

- I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. I can gain a strong relationship with Christ on my own. I can do life by myself. *You don't go to church; you are the church.*
- I love Jesus, but not the church.
- I can be spiritual, but not religious.
- I have been hurt by people in the church and I don't want to go through that again.
- All the church cares about is my money ...for their endless amount of programs.
- I've given up on church. It is so full of division and conflict. The party spirit really bothers me.
- I am so busy during the week and Sunday is my only day to relax. I can get what I need from God in my quiet time or hiking in the forest.
- My church just doesn't do that much for me.
- No one there *really cares*, it's all superficial.

How can we provide a sufficient answer to one or more of these "reasons"?

In This Study

Why is the church of such importance to your spiritual life? How is it integrally tied to your overall spiritual success? What are some practical things you can do to not only build up your spiritual life (become more rooted and established in your faith) as well as the life of those around you?

Over the next few weeks, you'll have the opportunity to learn more about:

- The importance of congregational prayer and encouragement through the struggles of sin.
- Effective communication in the home and in the church.

- How to develop an outward approach ... building deeper relationships as we care for one another.
- Finding more joy in life.
- Experiencing more gratitude and thankfulness for God's blessings.
- Getting on board with the mission of the church.
- Seeing the beauty in giving back to the Lord.
- Embracing the power of example. Your influence *matters*.

Lesson 1

Examining My Commitment to the Local Church

Introduction

As you look around your local congregation, you will find many differing viewpoints on the local church community. Some have grown up going to church ... they started at birth or at a very young age attending with their parents or grandparents ... and it's all they know. Others might not have been raised in a Christian home but came to Christ during their early twenties while in college or just starting out in life. And still others might not have come to be a part of the church until later in life, having spent much of their time in the world or attending some other religious community. So, perspectives on the value and need for the church cover a wide range, from:

- Taking many things for granted ... because it has almost always been a part of their experience.
- To placing the highest value on being a part of the church and its activities because they know life without it is difficult at best.
- And about everything in between.

Recognizing the Correct Starting Point

It is appropriate, I believe, before answering the question of my commitment to the local church, of first examining my commitment to Jesus Christ. A good connection to the church matters little if I am not where I need to be in my relationship with Christ. A strong relationship with Christ equals a strong relationship with the church as the two things go hand in hand. Likewise, a poor relationship with Christ equals a detached reality with the church. The claim so many are making today that *I can have Christ without the church* is blatantly false and leads to utter spiritual ruin. You cannot have Christ and not be a part of the church.

Perhaps the clearest passage that illustrates this is Ephesians 1.22-23:

And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

Note how this is a statement of union ... of one-flesh connectedness. You cannot have one without the other. What good is your head without the body? What good is your body without a head? The head directs the body and has authority over it, 1.22. The head needs the body in full-functioning form for effective action in the world. It is profound when we think of how the Son of God has humbly attached himself to an imperfect body (saints who believe in Him) and loved it. He has filled the body with the Spirit for the work of transformation so in the end He may present it to the Father *without spot or wrinkle... but holy and blameless*, Ephesians 5.27. If we neglect the church, we neglect Jesus.

Defining the Church

Built by God

Matthew 16.18 is the first place in the New Testament where we observe the word “church.” Here, Jesus is stressing the *certainty* of the church being established. No matter what happened, not even his death, would stop the coming of the church. God would build it. The Father would have his *called-out* ones. God would have *His people*. We are part of something that will never fail . . . God’s church will go on until He calls it home.

We must not miss the very special relationship, purpose, and place that God has called the church to. We are not part of some cold, strictly organized, and mechanical organization . . . we are part of the living and dynamic family of God, who has called us out of darkness to be His special people . . . His sons and daughters. We are the “called out body of people who belong to the Lord. He has called (us) out of one realm and into another.”¹ We need to make it personal and feel the warmth of God’s love and desire for having *a people* that is His very own.

A “Church” is an assembly or gathering

In the first century, the was almost never used in religious terms. More often, it was commonly used as a political term to refer to to the assembly “of full citizens, . . . in which political and judicial decisions were taken.”² One New Testament example where we see the word used secularly is found in Acts 19.32 where an illegal “assembly” gathered in support of the silversmiths of Artemis who wanted Paul, Gaius, and Aristarchus killed. *Ekklēsia* is used here to describe the riotous mob that had been called out of the marketplace and into the amphitheater to riot.

First century historians Josephus and Philo use *ekklēsia* quite often in their writings. They use it to describe *gatherings of people* comprised of religious, political, or other types of assemblies. The connotation did not refer to an organization or society.

As a spiritual reference

It is Paul who first takes the secular term so common in his day and uses it in a spiritual sense to refer to God’s people. Luke also uses it in this way in Acts 5.11 when he said great fear came upon the church after the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. As the church grew, Christians began to use the word to refer to a gathering of believers . . . so much that *ekklēsia* is now primarily associated inside a religious context.

Thinking chronologically, Paul’s first usage of *ekklēsia* appears in 1 Thessalonians 1.1 as he greets the saints in Thessalonica: *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy: To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace.*

Note here how Paul describes the unique identity of *assembly* or *gathering* in Thessalonica. They are *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. They belong to God. Not only that, but they are also in Christ.

¹ Wharton, Edward. *The Church of Christ: The Distinctive Nature of the New Testament Church*. Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1997, p. 39.

² O’Brien, Peter T. “Church.” Edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993, p. 123.

Those in the *ekklēsia* wear His name. They have been called from the kingdom of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ, Colossians 1.13.

Their assembling was not just something in theoretical terms . . . it was something that could be physically identified. It is a distinctive way of meeting. *Ekklēsia* applies to “an actual gathering of people, or to a group that gathers when viewed as a regularly constituted meeting.”³ When these people gathered for worship and fellowship, Paul expected his writing to be read *to all the brothers and sisters*, 1 Thessalonians 5.27, and to greet one another *with a holy kiss*, 5.26. Throughout the New Testament we find the apostles specifying local churches in places all over Europe and Asia. For example, we read of churches in Galatia, Judea, Corinth, Thessalonica, etc.

Note how this is a *particular* gathering. Sometimes people quote Matthew 18.20 and claim that any meeting of two or more Christians is the church. The New Testament does not support such an idea. Bumping into a friend at the beach or in a grocery store aisle is not the type of human interaction that constitutes a church.

In his writing, Sam Allberry⁴ traces the thought of a particular gathering of believers all the way back to the gathering at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19.1-6. He writes:

It was during this time that God spoke to Israelites as his chosen people, and identified them as uniquely belonging to him, commissioned to service. God also gave them his law, by which they would live as rescued people. This law served to define them and teach them how they were to live out their status as his people. The Bible later looks back on this gathering as the prototype of church. New Testament writers referring to this time used that very same word *ekklēsia* to describe what was happening at Sinai (In Acts 7.38, Stephen describes the gathering of God’s people at Sinai as “the assembly” – literally, the *ekklēsia*). At the foot of Sinai, the people of God were “churching” together.

This means much more than simply hanging out with another Christian or two with a coffee in hand and catching up on life. For the New Testament writers, the assembly was marked by being in the presence of God, receiving his words of promise and direction, and being constituted as his people. The weekly gathering of New Testament Christians could be described as a reenactment of what happened in Exodus 19. Christians gather as the people of God to receive his word afresh, to be reconstituted and recommissioned as his.⁵

Assembling with the local church is special

When coming together every week, you are participating in something that is timeless and vast. Spiritually we all make up the universal church, which is “the totality of God’s people under the New Covenant.”⁶ The Hebrew writer expressed it in this way:

³ Ascough, p. 124.

⁴ Allberry, Sam. *Why Bother with Church? And other questions about why you need it and why it needs you*. London: The Good Book Company, 2016. Online, Kindle Edition, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁶ Lewis, Jack P. *Basic Beliefs*: Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 2013, p. 199.

For you have not come to what could be touched, to a blazing fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, to the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of words. Those who heard it begged that not another word be spoken to them,

Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels, a festive gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to a Judge, who is God of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the blood of Abel, Hebrews 12.18-19; 22-24a.

We have all come to a spiritual mountain and are part of the universal church. We are already participants in this gathering, but there is more to it than this. When Paul spoke to the *ekklēsia* in Corinth, Thessalonica, etc., he was speaking of their location on earth. These Christians were part of the church of God in that place. The Christians in those places (and our local gatherings today) are the embodiment or gathering of the universal church. Just as the United States embassy in Bogotá is considered a part of sovereign territory of the US . . . even though it is in a foreign land, so is the local church as it meets in this world. Each week we come together in a particular location for a particular and special purpose. We gather in the presence of the Lord for the purpose of hearing and responding to his word.

The Church is Not

A building

Rather it is the gathering of people who meet in a building. It has been said, *people don't enter a church; the church enters a building.*⁷

A human institution

For some when they hear the words “the church,” they think of an organization or society. This may be due to the hierarchal organization of some churches which are often governed by arbitrary and impersonal rules and procedures. Such, while originally devised out of good intentions, is still nothing more than an addition to the New Testament example. The only thing that stands between each local church and Christ is no thing. Every congregation is autonomous and answers only to its King.

A denomination

Scripture only knows of one church. *Now as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function, in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another,* Romans 12.4-5.

These verses have a dual application, one being for life inside the local church, and the other as a wider focus to Christians everywhere. This is the same thought expressed in 1 Corinthians 12.13. Although we may be identified with a specific local congregation, every Christian has been *baptized into one body* by one Spirit.

Note the following passages which identify only one church:

⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

- Ephesians 5.23: *Christ is the savior of **the** body.*
- Colossians 1.18: *He is the head of **the** body.*
- Ephesians 1.23: The church is **His body**, *the fullness of him who fills all in all.*
- Ephesians 4.4-6: *There is **one body** and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

The church is God’s family

Twice in 1 Timothy 3, Paul refers to the church in the context of a family, 1 Timothy 3.4-5, 15. When we were saved, we were adopted by God as one of his sons or daughters, Romans 8.16-17. We are part of his household, Ephesians 2.19. We are all part of a building that is *being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit*, Ephesians 2.21-22. As a member of the church, you are part of his family of believers. When God draws people to himself, he draws them into family.⁸

Why You Need the Church

It reinforces God’s Truth

In 1 Timothy 3.15 Paul referred to the church as *the pillar and foundation of the truth*. This does not mean that the church legislates or defines what truth is, but the church is how God’s truth reaches the world as we live it out in everyday life. It is the truth that brought the church into existence, and it is the truth that shapes the church to be what she is to be. By the church living as God designed through the changed/transformed lives of every member, the truth is upheld and commended to a watching world.

Through our daily devotions and intake of God’s word we are personally provided with the opportunity to be impacted with truth. But it is when we deeply intertwine our life with the lives of other Christians in the local church that these truths can really come alive. Think about the value of sharing our experiences of spiritual growth and development with one another. In the local church we find each other repeating back God’s truths in casual conversation. For example, how many times have you heard someone say, “I was really struggling with _____, but God has really helped me with that. I’m not the same person I once was.” Someone else might say, “I do not understand why this is happening to me, but I trust in the promises of God from Ephesians.” “God has really helped me grow through my concentration on the beatitudes.” And on and on it goes. The more you make yourself available to other Christians in the local church, the more you’ll find God’s word reverberating through your life.

It builds momentum for prayer

One of the best ways to keep your prayer life where it needs to be is by being involved in the local church. Your local church should be characterized by prayer, Acts 2.42; 4.23-31; 6.1-6; 8.14-15; 12.1-5; 13.1-3; 20.36. Gathering with the local church helps us learn:

⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

- How to pray.
- The priority of prayer.
- The importance of God's glory in our lives.

Prayer inside the local church gets us out of ourselves. Many of our personal prayers are self-focused. But we should certainly be praying for more. We pray for lost souls, for the positive influence of the church in our community, for those who are sick and suffering, for our ministry servants who work among us (elders, ministers, deacons, teachers) and praise God for his faithfulness. Our public gatherings serve therefore as an opportunity to re-inform and reignite our personal prayer habits.

Many spiritual lives are characterized by prayerlessness. When we gather with God's people, we can get caught up in the momentum of the church's prayers. If you're struggling with prayer, resolve to link arms with likeminded brothers and sisters in the church and allow those prayers to energize and sharpen your personal prayer life.⁹

To live in obedience to Christ

We are to be part of the local church to obey Christ. By doing so we carry out his will to love his people and serve others. Local church membership helps us fully live out the following expectations:

- To love one another, John 13.34-35.
- Show honor to each other, Romans 12.10.
- Serve one another, Galatians 5.13.
- Bear with others, forgive others, Colossians 3.12-14.
- Encourage one another, 1 Thessalonians 5.11.

The importance of assembling is seen here:

And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching, Hebrews 10.24-25.

Every Christian has the personal responsibility to stir others up to love and good works. If we discount the essentiality of the local church we will wind up failing to encourage others and help them persevere in the faith and we rob others of the opportunity to fulfill their obligations to us.

Conclusion

We must never succumb to the world's pressure in deemphasizing the church. We must never attempt to redefine church on our terms, within the framework of our preferences. Theologian R. C. Sproul once said:

⁹ Emadi, Sam. *Resolve Yourself to the Local Church*. Desiring God. Online, January 4, 2020. See <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/resolve-yourself-to-the-local-church>

It is both foolish and wicked to suppose that we will make much progress in sanctification if we isolate ourselves from the visible (local) church.¹⁰

Charles Spurgeon also saw the importance of the local church when he said:

I believe that every Christian ought be joined to some visible church – that is his plain duty according to the scriptures. God’s people are not dogs, otherwise they might go about one by one. They are sheep and, therefore, they should be in flocks.¹¹

It is impossible to have Jesus but not the church. If we are in union with Christ, the head, then we are necessarily also connected to his body, the church. Christ is inseparably identified with his people and if we neglect the church, we neglect Jesus.

For Thought and Reflection

1. How are Christ and his church inseparably connected? What passage draws out this truth?
2. Why is God’s relationship with the church so special? What are some things we can do to make it more special in our lives?
3. Why must we come to identify the church as our family?
4. How does the local church reinforce the truth?
5. How does the church help you fulfill Hebrews 10.24-25 ... as well as a whole host of other passages?

¹⁰ Sproul, R. C., *The Soul’s Quest for God*. Carol Stream, IL, Tyndale, 1992. p. 151.

¹¹ Spurgeon, C. H., “The Head and the Body,” No. 2653, delivered 8/6/1882 at Metropolitan Tabernacle, <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols43-45/chs2653.pdf>.