

CHAPTER 5

THE CHURCH

I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

—Matthew 16:18 (MSG)

When individual followers of Jesus come together, we are called the Church. As a part of the Church, we find our community and our mission. I love the way Ephesians 1:20-22 reads in *The Message* version; it gives us one of the best visuals of the purpose and potential of the Church:

All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but *forever*. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.

—Ephesians 1:20-22 (MSG)

IN COMMUNITY

God designed us as humans to need each other; we're better together. We're designed to do life in community with other

people. The Bible commonly points to the power of community:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.
—Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

The Bible also speaks to the value of being together as the Church and reminds us to stay faithful in consistently gathering.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
—Hebrews 10:24-25

ON MISSION

Ephesians shows us that Jesus has a purpose and a plan to accomplish on earth. When we move past just following Jesus on our own to connecting with other believers in his larger Church, we become a part of the greater mission that God is accomplishing on the planet.

The Church is on a mission to extend the message of salvation through Jesus until the whole world knows.

BE THE CHURCH

We don't just "go to church," we must *be* the Church. Now technically, the place we go weekly to grow, worship God, and encourage each other *is* called church. Yet, it's also about "being" the Church every day of our life.

As followers of Jesus, gathering with other believers is essential for preparing us to *be* the Church, but it should not be our total spiritual experience. If all we are doing is attending a church service once a week, but not living for Jesus and extending the reach of his presence beyond Sunday, then we're not fully following Jesus.

There is power when we come together. We are the body of Christ: the extension of Jesus' heart and purpose on earth.

GETTING CONNECTED

One of the surest ways to keep our life healthy and connected to Jesus is by surrounding ourselves with other growing followers of Jesus. This is why getting involved with a local group of Christians is so essential and beneficial to our life.

The accountability and camaraderie that we have with other followers of Jesus is something pretty special. As the Church, we are called to reach and love the community we've been placed in, which is why most churches will have community outreach programs that are great to get connected with.

Another opportunity for growth can be found in joining a connect group. This is usually a smaller gathering of people from your church that goes through a Bible study together and encourages each other in a more casual and relational setting.

I know that jumping into a group of people you may not know is sometimes uncomfortable, but this smaller group setting will be invaluable in helping you learn and apply Scripture to your life. Our friendships really do make or break us, and connecting our life to other followers of Jesus is vitally important.

A CHURCH SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Each church that you participate in may have a slightly different feel or way of planning that gathering time, but here are several elements that you'll commonly experience during a church service.

Worship/Singing

Something powerful happens when we come together, worshipping and singing to God with other followers of Jesus. It may seem unnatural at first, but I highly recommend that you participate in worship; don't hold back. Jesus gave his life for us and deserves our praise and worship, along with the fact that worship is literally

one of the most powerful ways to draw close to God and feel his presence.

Public Prayer

Often a pastor will lead the church in a prayer together. Don't just observe; join in and connect with God as well. Ask for prayer and be a part of praying for others to get the miracles and breakthrough they need.

Bible Teaching

One of the primary values of attending a weekly gathering is to receive good teaching from the Bible. We want to spend time reading the Bible on our own, but when we are new believers, it's important to lean in and learn from other Christians who know more about the Bible than we do.

After leaving a church service where God's Word has been taught, always ask the Holy Spirit to help you apply and put that teaching into practice so that it can have a lasting impact.

Communion

Communion is a powerful time with Jesus where we reflect on all He did for us on the cross. When you take communion, you eat bread and drink grape juice or wine as a representation of Jesus' body that was broken for us and his blood that was spilled for us.

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

—1 Corinthians 11:23-25

This is one of the few ongoing practices that Jesus calls us to commit to; when we get too far away from what Jesus did for us on the cross we can begin to take him for granted and we can begin to slip into thinking that it's our efforts that get us salvation rather than Jesus sacrifice. Also, the fact that Jesus made a meal

an ongoing focus that he wanted you to participate in speaks to God's desire for connection and relationship with us.

Tithing/Giving

At each church gathering, there will be an opportunity to give. The Bible calls us to give a tithe, which is the first 10% of all that we earn financially.

Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

—Proverbs 3:9-10

We give this for two primary reasons. First, everything we have comes from God. When we give him back a tithe or offering from what he has given us, we affirm that he is Lord of all and the source of all that we need and have. Giving is a declaration of our trust in him. Secondly, our giving funds the work of Jesus, which is led by pastors and other ministry leaders.

The Presence of God

While God's presence is always with us, there are moments while we are gathered together as the Church that we'll feel a heightened sense of God's presence. This is because we're not following a distant God, but a loving Father who desires to be with us. You can expect that when you take time to seek him and lean into his Word and presence that he'll come close and minister to you. There are so many incredible results from times like these—for example, it may mean that God gives you wisdom on a situation that you've been needing, or someone gets supernaturally healed, or you may simply receive an overwhelming peace from God to remind you that you are loved and that he's with you.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The Bible calls the Church a body, and Jesus is the head of that body:

And he (Jesus) is the head of the body, the church; he is the

beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that
in everything he might have the supremacy.
—Colossians 1:18

God also set in place other leadership roles under Jesus within the Church. These are men and women who are called specifically to equip, encourage, strengthen, correct, empower and lead other believers to advance the kingdom of God forward.

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.
—Ephesians 4:11-13

The role of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers is to strengthen, equip, and encourage us along the path of following Jesus.

In many areas of our lives, we need coaches to keep us focused and on track with our plans and goals. In a similar way, the church leaders that Jesus places in the church and in our life are there as coaches as well. The more we embrace their role in our life, the greater fruit or fulfillment we'll experience.

Some reading this book may sense a call to one of these church leadership roles. It is a tremendous honor, but requires great sacrifice.

Be responsive to your pastoral leaders. Listen to their counsel. They are alert to the condition of your lives and work under the strict supervision of God. Contribute to the joy of their leadership, not its drudgery. Why would you want to make things harder for them?
—Hebrews 13:17 (MSG)

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CHAPTER CHALLENGE

STUDY IT THROUGH:

What does the Bible say that each individual Christian forms collectively? 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Who is the head and leader of the Church? Ephesians 1:22

Review some requirements for Church leaders laid out in 1 Timothy 3.

WALK IT OUT:

- If you don't already have a church service that you regularly attend, begin by finding one this week.
- Commit to attend weekly, unless you have to miss occasionally for work or vacation.
- See how your skills and gifts can be of service and get involved in the life of a church.
- If you feel called to ministry leadership, begin to serve at your church and enroll in a church internship or Bible college.