

The Importance Of Being The Church

By Pastor Mike Spaulding

“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” Philippians 1:9-11

One of the most blessed things Christians are privileged to participate in is the life of a local assembly of believers. It might surprise readers to learn that the Bible in both Testaments speaks almost exclusively within the context of local bodies. The Old Testament speaks specifically about the nation, tribes, and families of the Hebrew people. Their story of failure and success in being obedient to God and in becoming the people He desired them to be is a primary storyline of the Old Testament. The New Testament reads like a manual for righteous living within the context of the local church family.

Think about this friends – Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, Mark a Gentile audience, Luke for the benefit of Theophilus, John to Christians generally speaking, Paul to the churches in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae to name a few. One thing these letters have in common with the possible exception of Luke is that they were written to churches. One could argue that Paul’s letters to Timothy were written to an individual believer but even then Paul was instructing Timothy on how to handle issues within the body of believers.

My experience has been that most modern day Christians have

not considered these truths. If they did, the number of people who deprecate the church would not be so high and alarming. I've seen many developments during my walk with Jesus Christ but none quite as surprising as the great number of people who have become indifferent to the local bodies of Christ. Researchers have a name for these people. They are called the "dones." The name derives from the common attitude expressed by this demographic that they are "done" with the church, as if simply walking away from the local body is an answer to their frustration and is always a God-led decision.

Let me begin by admitting along with all those that have had a negative experience with a church, that the church has a lot of "warts." What I mean by that is that the church has a lot of blemishes. The reason is simple. Churches are comprised of people and people make messes. There are plenty of things that people rightly point to and say, "See that's the reason I don't belong to a church." Whatever your beef with the church is I'm sure you feel justified in remaining in that mindset. There are a couple of issues you need to consider if that is you though. One is that your perspective on the church is not shared by Jesus Christ. Jesus gave His life for His bride the church (Ephesians 5:23, 25). You are at odds with Jesus if you think the church is not worthy of your presence. Plainly stated friends, Jesus views His bride a lot differently than you do.

Additionally, your "feelings" shouldn't be the determining factor in whether or not you are part of a local body of believers. Feelings are a horrible barometer of truth. Knowledge should be the primary consideration. Let me illustrate. How many people have ever had doubts about their salvation? The answer is lots of people struggle with "feeling" saved. The real question you should ask yourself is this: Do you know that you are saved? Have you made a profession of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on Calvary's Cross to pay the penalty that sin demands? Do you

know that those who are saved are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession (1 Peter 2:9)? Do you understand that Christ is building up His body by removing the impurities in us all (malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, slander – 1 Peter 2:1)? Do you also understand that as those impurities are removed we are made a stronger "spiritual house" together (1 Peter 2:5)? Being a part of the body means going through life together, sharing one another's burdens, laughing and crying together, struggling to right wrongs together, and sharpening each other's thinking on subjects of great importance to every believer today.

Being a part of a local body of believers is a birthright (John 1:12-13) that too many Christians have sold for a bowl of slop just like Esau sold his birthright. Only after Esau had flippantly given up his blessing did he realize what a huge mistake he had made. Unfortunately for him and his posterity, this one decision set his life on a course of judgment and sorrow. He lived his life for himself and for his own satisfaction and paid a steep price. His children and children's children suffered greatly for Esau's wrong thinking.

When I speak with people who have hardened their hearts against the church I often hear in their words the hissing of our enemy who says to people, "You don't need to fellowship with your brothers and sisters. You can do this alone. Remember how hurtful they have been? Who needs that?" Friends, in the end times days we live in the enemy's strategy is clearer than it has ever been – divide and conquer.

It still surprises me that some Christians trot out the worn out excuse that, "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian." No one is saying that going to church makes anyone a Christian. What people who use this excuse are often trying to say is they can be spiritual without the local body. But being spiritual is not what we are to pursue is it? Christians are called to pursue godliness not adopt some form of

spirituality as a mind salve.

God has determined that the best possible context for His people to grow in grace and knowledge of Him is the local church. That is the thrust of Acts 2:41-42 which is the passage dealing with the beginning of the church at Pentecost. We read in verse 41 that three-thousand people were "added." The question is what were they added to? Clearly the local body of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ is in view. In verse 42 we find a great outline for what the church should look like even today. Note that this group of believers banded together to receive the apostle's teaching (which was Jesus' teaching – Matthew 28:19-20), to share their lives with one another (fellowship), to celebrating Christ's death on their behalf (the breaking of bread here can be understood as sharing meals together but it is more likely a reference to the Lord's Table or Communion which was still very fresh on the apostle's minds. See 1 Corinthians 11:26), and to prayer. That is a very good foundation for any local body.

Without the local body of believers, Paul's discussion of every believer having a gift that he or she should exercise for the benefit of other believers makes no sense at all. Who cares if someone has the gift of prophecy if that person never leaves his or her living room to share it with an assembled group of believers that recognize themselves as the body of Christ?

Now don't mishear me brothers and sisters. You can have a local body of believers meeting in someone's home. That's how the first church plant I was involved in started. But at some point as you grow and more families join you it becomes impossible to continue in that setting. You will need a larger meeting place with rooms for children and a nursery and bathroom facilities. Sounds like a building that people use for their weekly gatherings to me.

Another feature that I have noticed over the years that is

emblematic of the “dones” is that they become in many cases narrowly focused on a doctrine or two and those specific doctrines become their litmus test for association. There is an easy explanation for this. In a home church setting there is almost always a type “A” personality who sets the course of study and teaching and who functions for better or worse as an elder or pastor. His views on the Bible, on what are important and what isn’t, and on a number of other things become the de facto home church by-laws and guidelines. Step outside of the home church leader’s perspective and you’ll find yourself alienated. In many cases this same doctrine or “pet tradition” was at the center of controversy and served as the reason why an individual left a church in the first place. This raises an interesting question. Who is there to keep that home church leader in check? Who is there to say, “Wait that doctrine does not line up with the Bible”? The answer is no one. There is as the Bible says wisdom in a multitude of counselors.

In addition to receiving a word of encouragement, equipping, and sometimes correction through a carefully developed teaching sermon by Holy Spirit filled and led elders, believers also need to understand that our lives in Christ are shaped together by worship through singing, by our interactions with other believers as often as we meet together, by our service to one another when needs arise, by our receiving from the Lord’s Table, and by our common submission to the Word of God. These activities are nowhere encouraged nor pictured to be participated in isolation from one another. It is simply an untruth that some believers convince themselves is biblical.

Friends, the body of Christ is a multifaceted organism that grows and changes by nature. That is because the body of Christ is comprised of many different people with different perspectives on a host of topics. By standing together over time, we are made sure in the things we believe and why we believe them. A healthy body will have much discussion and

debate over the years. But therein lays a secret to the church's longevity. Doctrine focuses ministry and ministry develops servant-hood. All who claim Christ by faith are to be disciples and are to make disciples and the best way to fulfill this commission is to be an active part of a local body of believers.

Another passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians is a good place to close this exhortation. In 1:27 Paul offers some words of encouragement to the believers in Philippi. He says to them, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ;...standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel;" and then in 2:2 he says essentially the same thing, "make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." And then Paul identifies the foundation for being of one mind and one spirit in 2:3-4 – "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."

Folks, Paul is speaking about body life here. The context of the writing of the overwhelming majority of the New Testament is the local church. We learn how to be humble when we serve other people. We learn how to be untied in spirit as we grapple daily with the short comings of others as well as our own. Conceit, pride, selfishness, and ego are chipped away piece by piece all within the context of the local body of Christ as we travel this faith road together.

My encouragement to you dear reader, especially those who may have given up on the local church is to prayerfully reconsider your stance. Please seek out a local body of believers and ask God to lead you in that effort. I believe that as you pray for God to lead you, He will do exactly that; to a group of believers who have been praying for God to bring you and your family.

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